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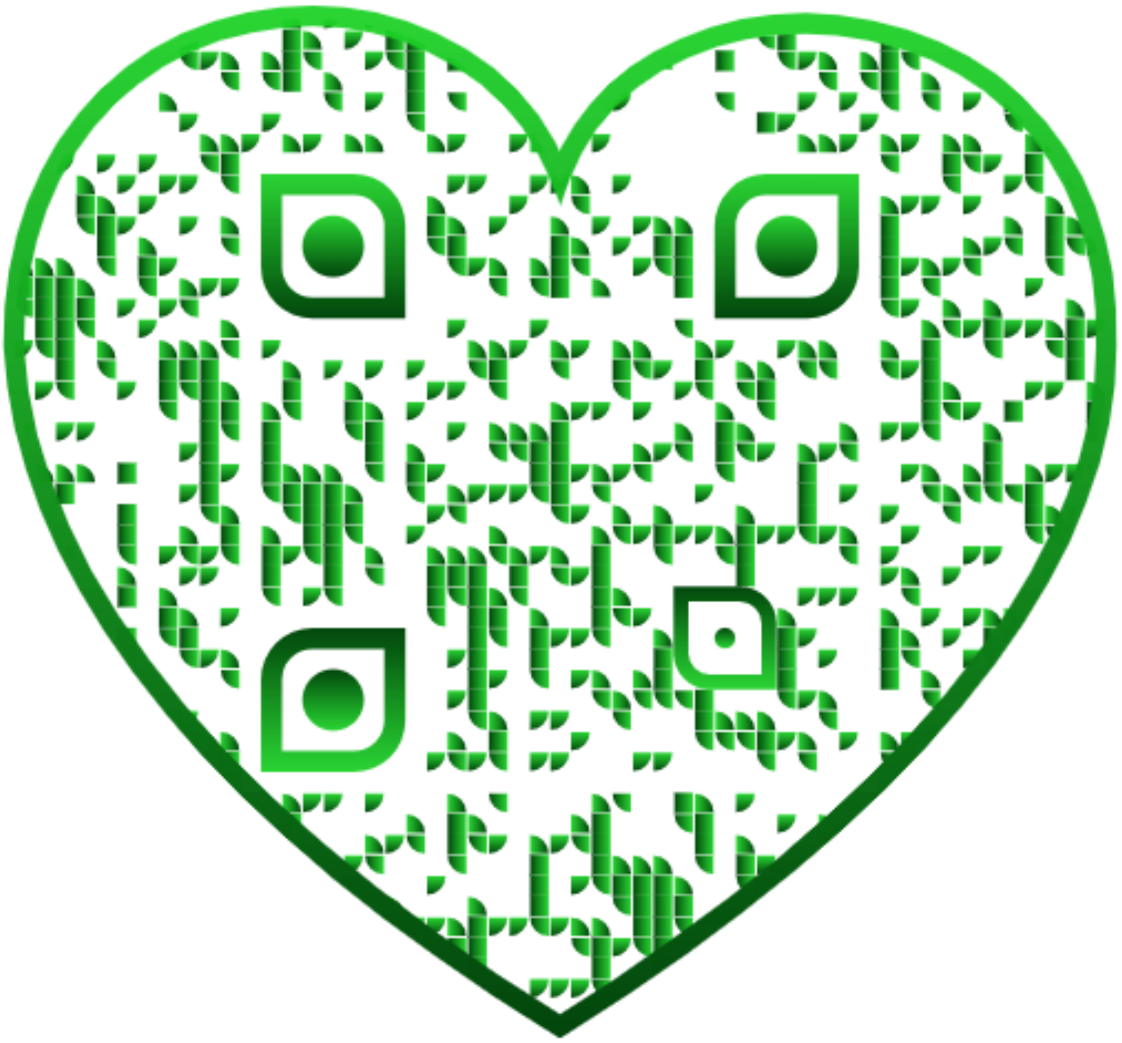

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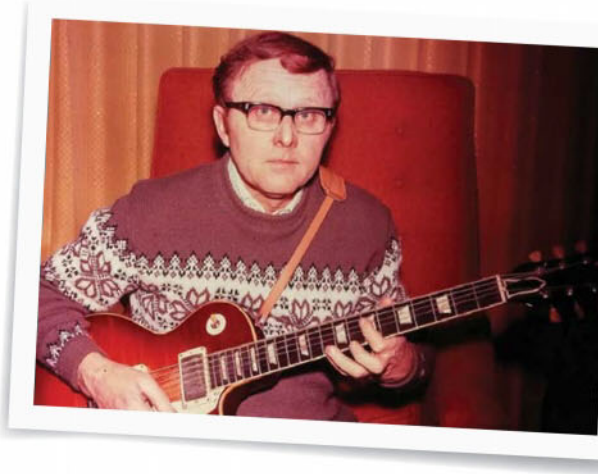
WELCOME

Mystery Train

Although the evolution of electric guitar technology and popular music was a symbiotic relationship for a large part of the 20th Century, there have been several instances in which artists were slow to take advantage of the tools available to them. Less than two years after the end of World War II, Fender's 'V front' Dual Professional – renamed the Super in the fall of '47 – was capable of delivering the kind of searing, overdriven guitar tones that wouldn't be heard commonly until pop music grew up, got the blues and became 'rock' two decades later.

Similarly, original Les Paul Standards such as this month's amazing cover star, Minnesota (seen below with its original owner Dan Moline some time in the late 1960s – thanks to Dave Miller for the pic) were forced to suffer several years in the wilderness before Messrs Clapton and Bloomfield showed the world how powerful and expressive their voice could be. Such is the mysterious beauty of art – it takes a very specific collision of the right tools, influence and inspiration to catch lightning in a bottle.

On the subject of mystery, despite recently celebrating its 62nd birthday, the Stratocaster's 'Synchronized Tremolo' is still an enigma to many Strat players. This month's free 32-page supplement will walk you through 10 steps to a perfect Strat setup and demystify the process for good...



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Turn to **page 20** to take advantage of this month's special *Guitar & Bass* subscription offer.

In this issue...

MEET THE EXPERTS...

HUW PRICE

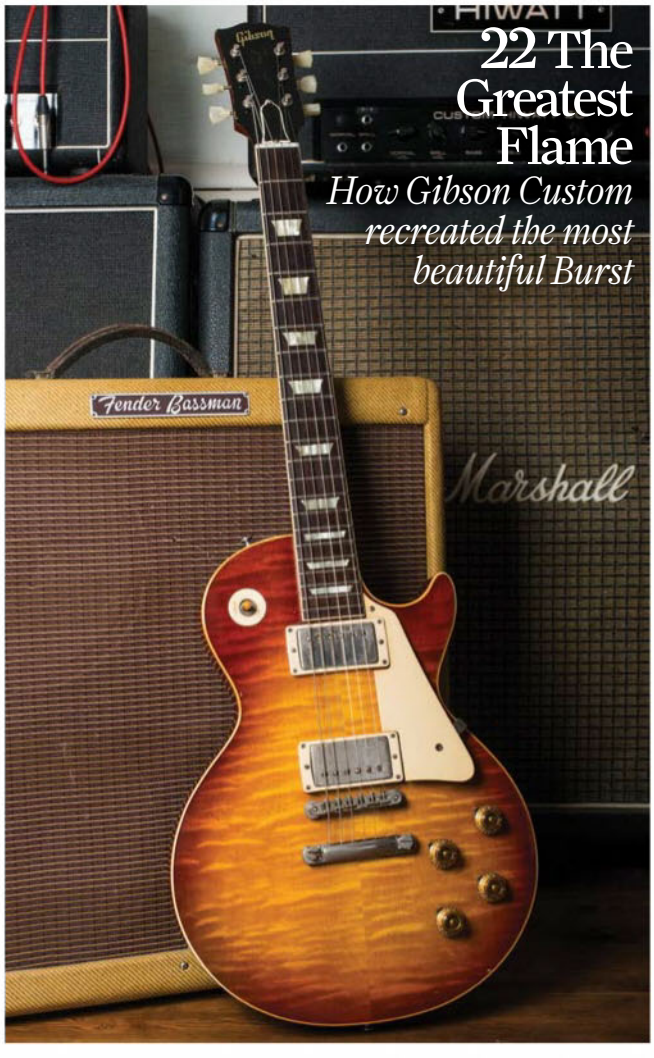
Our senior product specialist spent 16 years as a pro audio engineer, working with the likes of David Bowie, Primal Scream and NIck Cave. His book *Recording Guitar & Bass* was published in 2002. He also builds and maintains guitars, amps and FX.

DAVE HUNTER

Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*. Check out his column on page 8.

RICHARD PURVIS

A reformed drummer, Richard has been gigging for over 20 years as a guitarist and bassist, and working as a music journalist for almost as long. He also composes music for television, and is legally married to his 1966 Gibson Melody Maker.



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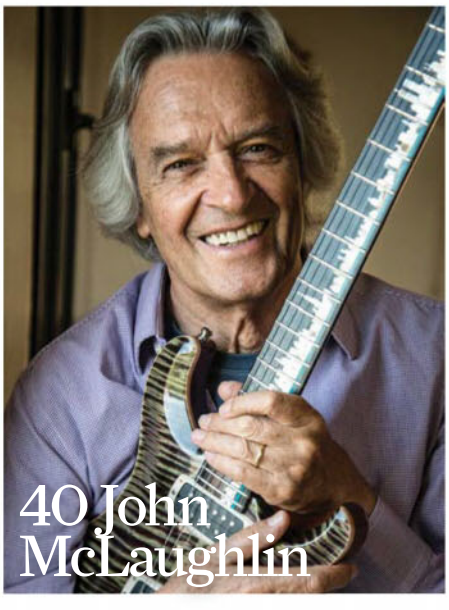

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ONES TO WATCH

Reverend Jenn...

WYE OAK & FLOCK OF DIMES

When cult Baltimore indie favourites Wye Oak took time out to reinvent after 2011's critically acclaimed breakthrough album *Civilian*, the band's multi-talented, multi-instrumentalist frontwoman Jenn Wasner admitted she had "fallen out of love with the guitar". It led the self-schooled guitarist to teach herself to play bass for the writing of the more electronic and experimental dreamy fourth album *Shriek*, released in 2014.

It meant a tranche of guitar-led demos remained on the cutting room floor until Wasner and the other half of Wye Oak, the equally instrument-promiscuous Andy Stack, decided to revisit them this year. The result is the mini album *Tween*, an eight-track amalgam of on-point woozy synth-led indie-pop, classic songwriting and lo-fi fuzzy, feedback-heavy guitar wrangling.

"A year ago, I moved from Baltimore to North Carolina, and Andy had already moved to Texas," Wasner tells *G&B* from the back of a tour van cutting across the Midwest. "When you move, you go through your old stuff and take stock, and I discovered basic recordings of a lot of the songs that went on to be on *Tween*. The thing that surprised me was that years after the fact, I still liked them. We didn't really have any plans to make a new record, but we went through a lot of the songs and we both felt when we heard them that we were still really interested in them.

"The thing that's interesting to me is that when I hear them I hear a lot of songwriting techniques that I was employing around the time of *Civilian*, but all the production is contemporary and a result of making *Shriek*. It's a great example of both of those time periods in our band coming together.

"We'd recorded basic verions of most of the songs in Baltimore in 2012/2013. The bulk of the additional production was done ourselves. It was really fun to produce the record, and we mixed it with a very talented guy, Hugo Nicholson [Julian Cope, Primal Scream], in LA."

G&B is also pleased to report that the recording process rekindled the love of the guitar for Wasner, who has played the instrument since the age of 12, following the tuition of her mother, who sparked her interest by introducing her to Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell records.

"Creativity is all about finding new paths to the same place, it's not necessarily something you can predict or control," she says. "At the time I was trying to write *Shriek*, I knew I was hitting a wall with the guitar and that path wasn't working. So the bass was a big component of the live performance of those songs. The long-term goal was to trick my brain into getting over whatever weird place of writer's block and stagnation I had been in. I'm writing on the guitar again, and I'm still using all the techniques I've learned, it's just that there are more available to me now."

Wasner has a Reverend signature model, the JW-1, which packs a pair of the company's own pickups and a striking monochrome 'optic interruption' finish. "I love the Reverends so much," she says. "Before I started playing Reverends, my main guitar was a Strat with a humbucker, which I liked because it was full and loud, but it was a bit bright for my tastes. The Reverends are just as full and loud, but the pickups are a little warmer and better-sounding to my ear. The second I started playing Reverends, I started getting a lot of compliments about my guitar tone.

"I love them, they're really easy to play, they're durable, and they hold tune really well. I'm really honoured they decided to make one just for me.

"When I play live with Wye Oak, I travel with three Reverends. I have the signature model, which is basically a Charger, two other Chargers and a Jetstream. Having three guitars is the only way I've found to be able to get through all of the alternate tunings I use without having massive tuning breaks. I have a Fender Mustang bass and use a Walrus Audio distortion on the bass, and for guitar it's pretty simple – a Fulltone Fulldrive distortion, which is a bit more mellow than the OCD, a Boss DD-6 and a custom modded-out Ibanez delay.

"I play through a Twin because it's the only amp I've found that's enough of a workhorse, so I don't blow it up in two weeks of touring. I prefer my AC15 for studio work, but I wouldn't feel great about taking it on tour. The Twin is undefeatable."

Wasner has also launched a solo project, Flock Of Dimes, releasing her first album, *If You See Me, Say Yes*, this September. That creative letting off of steam, she says, is vital to the continued success of Wye Oak: "The thing about the industry album cycle process is you're obligated to live with a record for a long time. You can't just put out record after record in rapid succession. Having two projects that I can stagger allows me to put more music into the world more quickly, and feel less restricted by either project. Andy feels the same. It's really important for us to have those other outlets so we don't ever feel restricted or confined by Wye Oak." **GW**

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Yo La Tengo, Sharon Van Etten, Warpaint*

GEAR *Jenn Wasner*

- **GUITARS** Reverend Jenn Wasner Signature JW-1, Charger & Jetstream; Fender Mustang bass
- **PEDALS** Fulltone Fulldrive, Boss DD-6, modded Ibanez delay, Walrus Audio Iron Horse distortion
- **AMPLIFIERS** Fender Twin, Vox AC15

WIN!

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This month, in association with Source Distribution, *G&B* is giving one lucky reader the chance to win an Eventide H9 Max – possibly the ultimate multi-effects stompbox, packed with studio-quality delays, reverbs, distortions and pitch-shifting effects. The H9 Max combines the best presets from Eventide's awesome TimeFactor, ModFactor and PitchFactor pedals, plus the free H9 software, which enables you to acccess every effect in the Eventide arsenal using Bluetooth, USB or MIDI. For more information on Eventide, go to **eventideaudio.com**. To be in with a chance of winning this sensational tone-shaping prize, visit **guitar-bass.net/comps/eventide** and answer the question below.

Q What is the name of Eventide's delay effects processor?

A TimeFactor **B** ModFactor **C** PitchFactor

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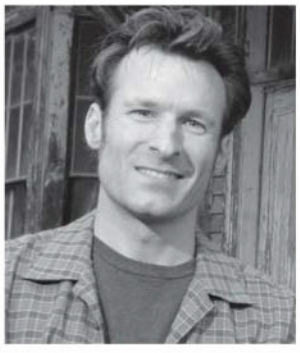
Letters from America

Chris Benson's hand-wired boutique amps are works of simplified brilliance. **DAVE HUNTER** checks out the 6V6-driven Chimera



DAVE HUNTER
Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of numerous books including *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*.

I'm a fan of simple amplifiers. I have long lauded the Thoreauvian qualities of many of Dr. Z's designs, Matchless' Lightning and Spitfire, several of the great tweed-era templates, and so on. Even so, I somehow didn't expect much when, about a year ago, I plugged in to the first Benson I ever tried, the two-knob, 15-watt Monarch. Maybe it was the austere looks, redolent of a semi-homebrew aesthetic. Who knows? More fool me. After taking that diminutive darling through its paces for just a few minutes, I quickly realised that Chris Benson of Portland, Oregon, knew exactly what he was doing by eschewing the bells and whistles and dialing in that dual-6V6 power plant to render a delightfully responsive, no-bad-tone-onboard performance tool.

The results reminded me of what hooked me about rock 'n' roll in the first place: not the gear, not the messing and tweaking and fiddling about, but the playing. I thanked Benson for forcing his clients' hands in that direction, curbing our more base instincts in the process, and promised to check out the big brother to the cornerstone Monarch, the 4x6V6-driven Chimera, as soon as it became available. Well, it's available, and *Guitar & Bass* seems the perfect place to shout about it.

The Chimera is totally hand wired, using mainly point-to-point circuitry and a few turret strips for support, with top-notch components making the connections and nothing superfluous to clutter a robust signal path. The amp uses DC filaments for low-noise performance, Mallory 150M coupling capacitors and carbon-comp resistors proliferate the circuit, transformers are custom-spec'd from Mercury Magnetics, and it's all contained within a custom-made aluminum chassis.

The preamp design is generally the same as that used in the smaller Monarch, but Benson adds a bass control in place of the smaller amp's British/American voicing switch to extend the control complement to an extravagant three knobs. Round back, the only features of note are the individual outputs for 8- and 16-ohm speaker cabs (this is one place where I feel Chris could afford to 'complicate' things a little, with another 8-ohm out to enable the use of two 16-ohm cabs together). The output stage couples four 6V6GTs in cathode bias with no negative feedback. Power comes courtesy of a 5AR4 tube rectifier, which delivers 365-volt DC to the plates of the output tubes – just a little more than you'd find in the average tweed Deluxe.

"I like to keep [the voltage] a little lower in cathode-biased designs," Chris Benson tells us of the amp's B+ levels. "I use 6V6s instead of two 6L6s or EL34s because, one, I don't think anything else sounds as sweet. SSecondly, the drive voltage of the 6V6 is what I designed the PI and preamp around, and I like it when things break up in a certain order, very close together, because that magnifies compression and makes the drive smooth."

Despite the lacquered-tweed looks of the review sample (other coverings are available), the Chimera is a long, long way from being merely a 'doubled-up Deluxe', both in build and in performance. Topology-wise, the amp apes no previous design in particular, but pays tribute to a handful of Benson's favourites.

"The preamp circuit, like the Monarch, is a complete mash-up of circuits I love... or, it's all original, depending on how you look at it! I borrowed from Supro, Mesa, Fender, Vox, etc, and used

The Chimera sounds superb at all levels. It's one of those amps you plug into and go "ahhh..."

KEY FEATURES

Benson Chimera 30-watt amplifier head

- **PRICE** £1,399 (approx, excluding shipping, VAT and other duties)
- **CONTROLS** Volume, treble, bass
- **OUTPUT** 30 watts
- **TUBES** 2x 12AX7s, 4x 6V6GTs, 5AR4 rectifier
- **FEATURES** 8- and 16-ohm outputs
- **DIMENSIONS** 18.5x8x8 inches
- **WEIGHT** 22lbs
- **CONTACT** chris@bensonamps.com **www.bensonamps.com**

a couple of my own ideas to try to make a preamp that works for any guitar. I like interactive tone controls – I think the bass and treble play off each other nicely. The amp is basically gain stage-tone controls-volume-gain-stage-phase inverter-power amp. As far as design criteria, I was going for a versatile amp that is naturally compressed-sounding, that has a smooth transition into breakup. Basically, an amp that would work in most situations in a wide variety of applications."

I've already raved about the Chimera's simplicity; be aware that it comes with a delightful portability, too. The head weighs a mere 22lb, and should sit easily on any cab you can throw at it. Little-known though Benson still is – even here in the States, never mind the UK – Chris's amps have won endorsements from several eager pros. Chris Funk of The Decemberists; Casey Foubert with Sufjan Stevens; Phillip Meneses of The Band Perry and Justin Bieber; Yuuki Matthews of The Shins; Ian Krist of Blind Pilot; and Peter Lalish of Lucius have all toured and recorded with these hand-built creations of late, and their good reputation appears to be spreading.

Plugged alternately into a StoneAge 1x12 with an EVM 12L Classic and a Port City 2x12 with one Celestion G12-65 and one Celestion Cream, and used to amplify a Gibson 1959 Les Paul reissue, a Rocketfire S-type, a Heatley Parisienne with vintage 1959 P-90s, and a '57 Fender Telecaster, the Chimera sounds superb at all levels. It's one of those amps that you plug into, play a little, and go "ahhh...". There's nothing fancy going on here – no over-cooked gain, no attempt to do Marshall crunch, Twin Reverb clean, or Dumble lead – the amp just sounds and feels great. Each guitar stays pretty clean up to at least 11 o'clock on the volume control, and sounds superb in the process. At these levels, things remain impressively stout for a cathode-biased amp with no negative feedback. Even the Les Paul remains bold and gutsy, sounding sweetly jazz-inflected in the neck position up to about 10.30. Yet all-comers are swathed in a rich harmonic sparkle that adds girth and texture to the notes without ever clouding up the clarity.

Despite the lacquered-tweed looks, this is a long way from a doubled-up Deluxe

Plenty of smaller or mid-sized amps just don't seem to deliver the firmness that humbuckers or P-90s demand to retain their full, natural voice when played shy of overdrive. The Chimera, however, somehow manages to do so up to impressive volume levels (it's no 100-watt Hiwatt, but I can't imagine needing a whole lot more than this for most gigging scenarios, given today's proclivity for lower stage volumes). It sounds big-amp, big-bottle and big-iron firm, but without ever being tight or sterile. Which is to say, even at clean settings, there's a tactile compression that makes the thing delightfully playable and interactive.

Rolled up to between 11 and 2 o'clock, depending on the guitar, the Chimera segues into delicious early-breakup sounds, and beyond there delivers succulent vintage-inspired overdrive. There's no harshness, fizz or jarring frequencies to be heard anywhere. It's all very humble, very understated. It just sounds great: consistently trenchant and playable, with a harmonic balance that flatters all guitars, and a multi-dimensionality that refuses to blur out until the very top of the volume dial. The result feels entirely old-school, yet there's surprising versatility across the range. The tone controls are extremely effective, yet it's hard to point them to a 'wrong' sound; some you might not use, sure, but there's little that sounds truly 'bad'. Given the above-noted firmness in cleaner settings, it also takes a range of OD pedals beautifully. So – yeah, the Chimera is another winner, and really a startlingly responsive little player's amp – all at a startlingly accessible price for what it delivers in quality of build, tone and character.

READER BOARDS

Versatility is a must for Hungarian guitarist **SZABOLCS MÁTYÁS**, so he employs a two-tier 'board stacked with cool pedals...

KIT LIST

Szabolcs Mátyás

- **PEDALS** Morley Steve Vai Bad Horsie 2 wah, JAM Pedals RetroVibe, MXR Phase 90, Guyatone FL3, Xotic SP Compressor, JAM Pedals TubeDreamer+, Xotic AC+, VFE Alpha Dog, Analog Man Bi-Chorus, Analog Man ARDX20 Dual Delay (with Amazeo control), GigRig G2 switching system, TC Electronic PolyTune
- **PATCH CABLES** Lava Mini Soar DIY Kit
- **POWER SUPPLY** TheGigRig Generator/Distributor/Isolators
- **BOARD TYPE** Custom-built flightcase (Tajti Music Ltd), home-made interior (woodwork: Zsolt Tamasi, soldering: Balazs Palfi, assembly: myself)
- **HEAR IT HERE** bit.ly/Szabolcs

What inspired this setup?

"I play in different bands, so I wanted to have a versatile pedalboard that fits well in every situation. I also needed easy accessibility to different effects and the capability to switch my amp via MIDI. The core of my board is a TheGigRig G2 switching system. Sound-wise, I wanted everything from shimmering modulation to full-driven rock tones. On the other hand, my goal was to find the right pedals, that do not mess with my dry guitar sound, just add new dimensions to it. Andy Timmons' current rig was a good starting point as well."

Tell us a little about the journey...

"Digital multi-effects were the order of the day when I started my musical journey in the late 80s. I went through all the floor and rackmount multi-effects over the years. It has taken a long time to realise how these processors influence my pure amplified guitar sound. Thanks to my old friend Zsolt, I had the opportunity to experiment with different analogue pedals. I have fallen in love with the warm sound of these pedals. Zsolt helped me to build my first pedalboard around the TheGigRig MIDI-14 switching system. However, it turned out to be too large and heavy."

Is there another pedal that you are looking to add?

"I am pretty satisfied with my current pedalboard. However, a Morley EOV volume pedal and a DigiTech Whammy pedal are on the list."

What guitars and amps do you use with this board?

"My main gigging guitars are my trusty Ibanez AT300AV (former Andy Timmons model) upgraded with a SuperVee BladeRunner tremolo, a Suhr Standard and my 25-year-old Ibanez JEM 7 VBK. I have been using an Engl Retro Tube 100-watt head for two years. The Retro Tube is a very touch-sensitive amp, and provides everything from pristine cleans to full-on rock. I am experimenting with my new BluGuitar AMP1 as well."

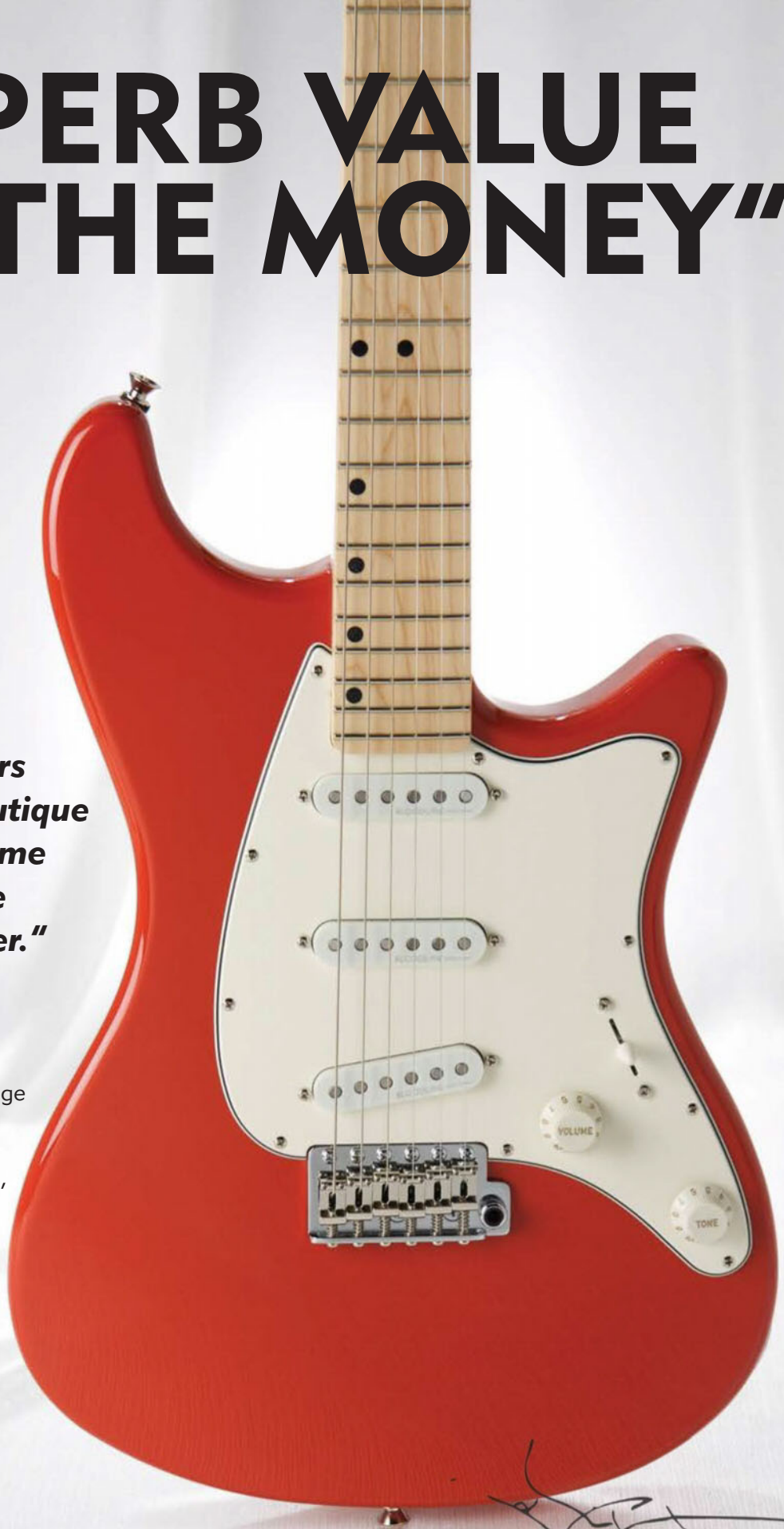
What lessons have you learned along the way?

"I have found that I can have the best distorted sounds if the gain control of the amp is not turned up all the way (it is around 6-7 on channel two of my Engl Retro Tube amp). I can add a little boost from my TubeDreamer+ or AC+ pedal if I need a little bit more distortion (gain cascading). The result is a more pleasing tone to my ear. I can dial in beautiful drive tones with my drive pedals used alone with the clean channel of the amp. Then I add a touch of delay and/or reverb over the top of the basic sound and I am in guitar heaven."

Guitar & Bass SHOW US YOUR BOARD

To be in with a chance of seeing your pedalboard in the mag, email the details and an image to **guitarandbass@anthem-publishing.com**

"SUPERB VALUE FOR THE MONEY"



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Guitar & Bass, April, 2016

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TEST PILOTS
PRS BRENT MASON SIGNATURE

G&B recently gave a trio of lucky readers the chance to try out a PRS guitar for a whole year. **GRAHAM SLOAN** takes the PRS Brent Mason Signature for a spin with his band The Riffreshers

Graham Sloan
- **TEST INSTRUMENT** PRS Brent Mason Signature
- **BAND** The Riffreshers (www.theriffreshers.co.uk)
- **MAIN PEDALS & AMPS USED,** Mesa/Boogie TriAxis, Mesa/Boogie 2.90 power amp, Thiele ported 200w EV cabs, Mesa/Boogie Mark V, TC and Rocktron rack effects, pedalboard loaded with Fulltone, TC, Hilton volume, Dunlop 535Q Cry Baby wah, Wampler Ego compressor, Hot Wired OD, Latitude tremolo and Keeley compressor pedals
- **GIGS PLAYED SO FAR** Wedding Services Scotland showcase, Club 29 Glasgow, Hopetoun House Edinburgh.

In January, with much persuasion and encouragement from my better half, Mo, I entered *G&B*'s 'win a PRS guitar for a year' competition. One of these was a PRS Brent Mason Signature. I sent off my entry, along with various videos of me trying to emulate Brent Mason's tunes (if you are unfamiliar with his playing, he is one of Nashville's top session players and has played with everyone: Shania Twain, Alan Jackson, Vince Gill, Chet Atkins, Brad Paisley, Dolly Parton, Reba McEntire, the list goes on!). To my surprise, I was selected.

I took delivery of a PRS Brent Mason Signature a couple of weeks ago. The guitar came strung with .010-052s, and a slightly higher playing action than my personal preference. So I spent the first few days setting it up with .009-046s, a slight turn of the truss rod, trem spring adjustment and getting used to its fine features. This guitar plays just beautifully. The Brent Mason is based on other PRS models, namely the DC3 and the NF3, with slightly hotter wired humbuckers from the DC3 and a single coil from the NF3. It has a bolt-on Pattern maple neck with a rosewood fingerboard – not quite the wide-fat nor wide-thin neck profiles which PRS is well known for.

We are certainly in Fender tone territory, and the five-way selector switch takes you to those traditional and classic sounds

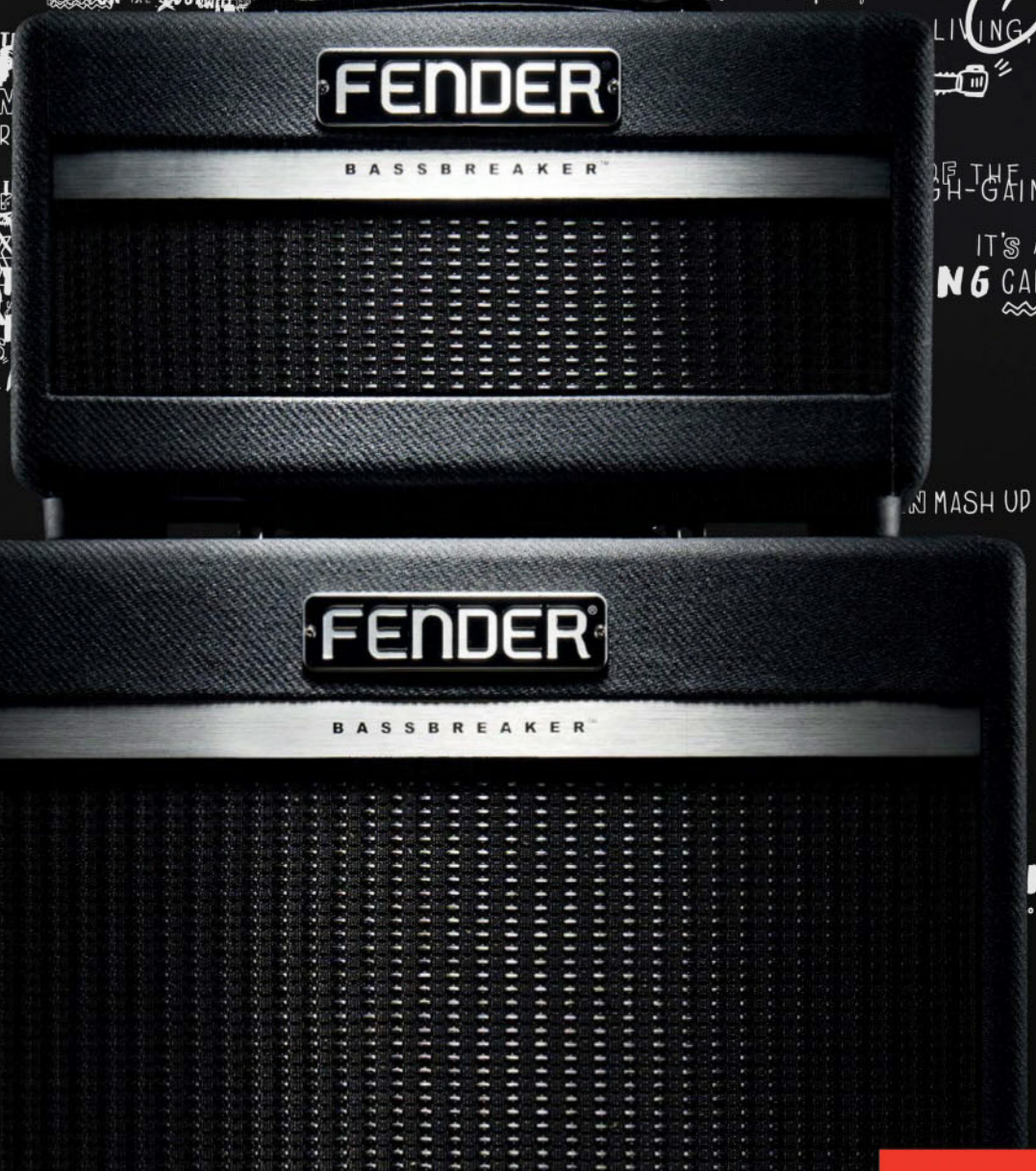
With regards to sounds, we are certainly in Fender tone territory, and the five-way selector switch takes you to those traditional and classic sounds. That said, the positioning of the five-way selector switch will take some getting used to, as it sits behind the volume control rather than in the familiar Stratocaster location. The mini-switches give us the choice of humbucker or single-coil options and overall it feels and sounds like a Fender on steroids.

There's minimal volume drop when switching between the dual/single-coil modes, and in humbucking mode there's added thickness, making it sound fatter than it does when in single-coil mode.

The middle pickup is bright. Both in-between options (bridge and middle; neck and middle) are also three-dimensional in character and sweet-sounding, with very usable tones. Low-gain sounds are tough and thick, and heavily-saturated tones are big and direct-sounding, making this PRS a dream studio or covers band guitar.

Besides doing a lot of dep gigs and recording, I play guitar with The Riffreshers, a Glasgow-based seven-piece function band with an extensive repertoire, which I am certain the PRS Brent Mason will excel at accommodating.

THERE ARE NO WORDS



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The Avalanche Run, bottom left, on Paul's pedalboard on stage at Bluedot Festival

TEST PILOTS EARTHQUAKER DEVICES AVALANCHE RUN

PAUL GREGORY's ethereal guitar soundscapes are at the heart of Newcastle band Lanterns On The Lake's beautiful widescreen music. The EarthQuaker Devices Avalanche Run seemed like his perfect reverb and delay pedal, so we sent it on tour with him...

Paul Gregory

- **TEST INSTRUMENT** EarthQuaker Devices Avalanche Run
- **PRICE** £299
- **BAND** Lanterns On The Lake
- **MAIN GUITARS, AMPS & PEDALS USED** Eastwood Airline '59 Coronado, modded Epiphone Dot, Epiphone Les Paul, Vox AC30, Maxon OD9, Fulltone 69, Z.Vex Super Hard On, DigiTech DigiVerb, DigiTech DigiDelay, Line 6 DL4
- **GIGS SO FAR** Larmer Tree Festival, Bluedot Festival, Deer Shed Festival

Lately, I've become rather fascinated by EarthQuaker Devices. I've used quite a lot of their pedals, a particular favourite of mine being the Dispatch Master reverb/delay. So when I was asked to road test the new EQD Avalanche Run, I think I may have let out a squeal of delight, probably audible only to me... but a squeal nonetheless.

Lanterns On The Lake were due to play Bluedot Festival in a few weeks, accompanied by Royal Northern Sinfonia – a perfect opportunity to give the pedal a good workout.

The Avalanche Run has a lot of sounds in it! The reverb and delay feel quite interactive and the different modes – reverse, normal and swell – can create a huge host of soundscapes. For the purposes of this road test, however, I wanted to use the reverb as a core sound for the songs and the delay for sound-on-sound pseudo looping and some tempo-based parts. To get the most out of the pedal, an expression pedal can be connected to control all sorts of things. Sadly, I didn't have one to hand, though I found the delay time and mix controls easily accessible with my feet.

So... on to band rehearsals for Bluedot. Blasting through the set in our rehearsal room, fuelled by cups of tea and a good selection of crisps, my first impression was that the reverb is beautiful. I mean really beautiful. It's voiced perfectly, feels as if it naturally filters some low end from the decay and the top end is smooth. It was easy to get a nice reverb-heavy sound without turning my entire sound to a muddy mush.

I set the decay at around 11 o'clock and the mix at around 1 o'clock and left the pedal like that for the whole set. I fired overdrives, fuzz and a heap of delays and loops through it (courtesy of a Line 6 DL4) and the reverb performed admirably – no weird clipping or muddiness, just tons of post-rock/shoegazey/ambient fun.

That became the base reverb for at least 70 per cent of the songs. The other 30 per cent of the set, I reverted back to my older DigiTech DigiVerb, the simple reason being the 100 per cent wet functionality. On my old DigiTech in church mode, when the mix is set to 100 per cent, the volume doesn't change; on the Avalanche Run when the reverb is set

Soundchecking ahead of Lanterns On The Lake's set

On stage with Royal Northern Sinfonia

to 100 per cent, everything gets much quieter, so this setting didn't work for me.

The delay sounds great and, like the reverb, is easy to set up. The tone control was useful to get the delay to sit right in the mix, and I liked it quite dark. The Avalanche Run does sound-on-sound looping with endless feedback. However, the delay time has a maximum of two seconds, which might sound like a lot, but sometimes you just need more – and I found myself needing more… at least two seconds more. A minor grumble, but given that the Avalanche Run is a DSP pedal, I'm not sure why it's limited to two seconds. I'm sure there's a reason. Due to this, I was going to use the delay only for simpler stuff, with the tap tempo – a feature I'd always wished the Dispatch Master had.

Onto my pedalboard it went. The top-mounted jacks meant it could be tucked into the bottom-left, with the delay time and mix controls accessible by foot. For me, the big test of any pedal is how it handles a live situation – not just in terms of how it sounds; this thing is very user-friendly. After the last rehearsal, I hadn't played the pedal until we arrived at the amazing Jodrell Bank Observatory for Bluedot, so unpacking my board to find the settings on every pedal all over the place I quickly set about sorting out the dials.

I was able to dial in the sounds on the Avalanche Run immediately: power on, lights flashing, a quick strum and everything worked nicely. Beer?

Playing with a 20-piece orchestra behind you is an awe-inspiring thing, and it also makes it a very different type of gig. The guitar and orchestral lines complement each other, so making sure I had the right onstage volume and tone was something to think about. I recently had my Vox AC30 serviced by the rather amazing Stoneham Amplification and it sounds amazing… and loud! So, getting the balance took a bit of time. I use a fair amount of reverb pretty much all the time and the Avalanche Run certainly helped to keep things up-front due to its voicing, without the sound getting too boomy or overcooked, or pushing everything to the back of the mix, which reverb can sometimes do.

We were first on the bill due to the challenges of setting up and soundchecking a full chamber orchestra, and the sun was very bright onstage. In a dark rehearsal room, I had the LEDs covered with a plectrum to stop them burning out my eyes, they were so bright, but on stage it's a welcome feature and the tap tempo is easy to see.

I found the Avalanche Run inspiring. It really moulded with my guitars and amp and I soon forgot it was new

The tap function works even if the effect is off, so I was able to tap in the time before I needed the delay. The silent switching is also an excellent choice for this pedal – nothing ruins a quiet moment in a song like the sound of 'CLICK'. It all adds up to a very 'stage-friendly' pedal. You can see where it's set and what it's doing, and it doesn't make a noise when its not supposed to. Also… no hum!

Gig time at Jodrell Bank

I kept the delay off for the most part, and when I needed to I was able to push up the mix knob using my foot mid-song, and then whack it down again. Doing it this way worked just fine, although having separate footswitches for the delay and reverb would have been welcome during the gig. The optional expression pedal would of course cover this, but given that it can control so many other functions, such as the toggle between reverse/normal delay and repeats, it would be a shame to use it just to control the delay mix.

During the parts of the set when I used the looper parts from the DL4, getting down on the floor I was able to add in some unplanned grainy reverse delays from the Avalanche Run – and it sounded massive. It really is a joy to use this pedal for on-the-fly stuff. I must get an expression pedal…

The footswitches felt really solid, even when I gave the on switch a proper whack in over-excited fashion – it certainly doesn't feel as if there is any risk of breakage. It's a good solid design that I reckon will stand up to the usual tour-bashing pedals get. Practicalities aside, I found the Avalanche Run inspiring. It really moulded with my guitars and amp, and I soon forgot it was new and just played. It's a glorious-sounding thing. Despite having only a couple of rehearsals, the Avalanche Run was gig-ready really quickly – I didn't feel I needed to spend more time to get to know how to use it live.

The Avalanche Run feels like a Dispatch Master on steroids and I've only scratched the surface of what it can do. It's definitely a keeper and will remain on my board. Nice work EarthQuaker!

SOUNDTRACK OF MY LIFE

Grant Nicholas

Feeder main man and solo artist picks nine of the best from his record collection

Grant Nicholas is the singer and guitarist in British indie-rock stars Feeder. Formed after the South Wales-born Nicholas moved to London, the band went on to release top 10 albums in the shape of *Yesterday Went Too Soon*, *Echo Park* and *Pushing The Senses*. Nicholas released a solo album, *Yorktown Heights*, in 2014. Feeder are on tour throughout the UK in September and October and their new album, *All Bright Electric*, is released on 30 September.

Led Zeppelin
HOUSES OF THE HOLY

"I have always loved Led Zep since first hearing *Black Dog* when I was around eight or nine years old. They are one of the all-time greatest rock 'n' roll bands and their mix of the heavier riffs and folk-influenced acoustic songs really connected with me and made them so dynamic. *Houses Of The Holy* is a great album and has one of my favourite sleeves of all time. Absolute class."

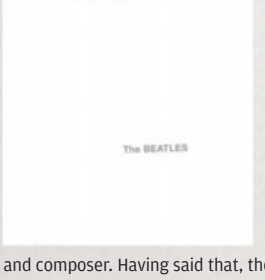
Nick Drake
PINK MOON

"Nick Drake was a true talent and his fingerpicking style was exceptional. He has always influenced me, especially when writing my solo album *Yorktown Heights*. He had such a natural vocal delivery, and when you listen to his records that grabs you from the off. One of my favourites. It's just a shame he didn't make more music, but in some way that makes him more special."

Neil Young
HARVEST

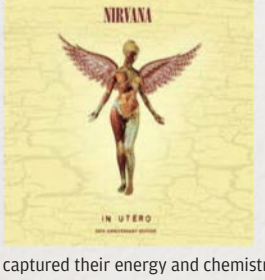
"I am a massive Neil Young fan and was lucky enough to catch his set when I played Hyde Park the same day. His voice is still bang-on and he can rock a crowd as well as he did in his early days. Before the show I did a cover of *Heart Of Gold* on Radio 2 as kind of a tribute. He's someone who has been an inspiration to me. He is a legend and there will never be another like him."

The Beatles
THE BEATLES



"The Beatles were an incredible talent and the sheer strength and diversity of their writing was mind-blowing. Both Lennon and McCartney we musical geniuses, but George Harrison was also a very talented musician and composer. Having said that, they would never have sounded the way they did without Ringo. I love all of the their albums, but *The White Album* is really beautiful."

Nirvana
IN UTERO



"Nirvana were an unstoppable force of nature, and they changed the face of rock music. It was great to be part of the 90s music scene, and Nirvana were like gods at that time. I love the rawness of this album, it really captured their energy and chemistry. It would have been so easy for Kurt and the band to have bowed to record company pressure but he stuck to his beliefs."

Fleetwood Mac
RUMOURS

"This album reminds me of my childhood in South Wales. It brings back so many memories and is still a favourite summer record in our house. It's beautifully recorded and has that warm organic 70s sound that I love. There are some timeless classics on this and it still sounds so good. This was the record that put Fleetwood Mac on the radar on a massive worldwide scale."

The Beach Boys
PET SOUNDS

"Brian Wilson was a genius who created a sound like no other. The harmonies and surf undertones on this album are so cool, and it still sounds so current. I think his obsession to compete with The Beatles pushed him to new heights and drove him slightly mad, but the end result is beautiful. I remember first hearing The Beach Boys in my dad's Rover on old eight-track cassettes as a child."

Black Sabbath
PARANOID

"Sabbath are still a massive influence and I listened to this album a bit during the recording of the new Feeder album. We really wanted to get a more analogue sound, and I love the sounds of the drums, particularly, on this. I remember covering *NIB* and *Paranoid* in my school band, aged 11 – we were called Sweat Leaf. Ozzy's voice and the guitar riffs on this are great. I love Sabbath."

ELO
OUT OF THE BLUE

"Jeff Lynne is one of the most underrated writers and musicians. He was incredible not only with his work with ELO, but also his co-writing with Tom Petty. I really like the sleeve, and this was always a favourite spin for me growing up. ELO had a distinctive sound and I really like the use of strings and vocal harmonies. Jeff Lynne is finally being recognised as the talent he is..."

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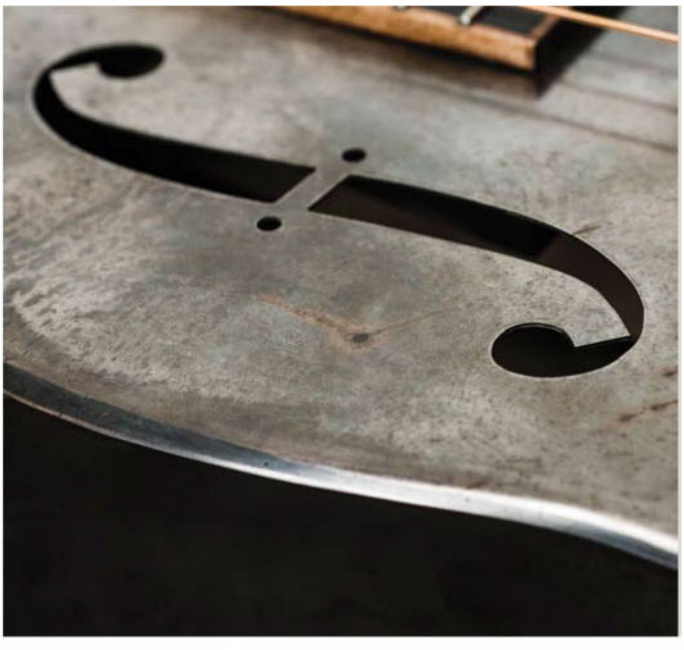
Mule Resophonic instruments are hand-built by former Huss & Dalton luthier Matt Eich in Saginaw, Michigan. His beautiful, 1930s-inspired creations are achingly cool, and this Single Cone Resonator is no exception. A steel-body, single-cone, biscuit bridge resonator with a slotted headstock option and a neck that joins the body between the 12th and 13th frets, the Mule has an old-time tone that's so evocative it transports you immediately to the era of crackly 78rpm blues on shellac. Head to UK boutique store James' Home Of Tone (homeoftone.co.uk) to order, or visit muleresophonic.com to hear various models in action and find out why players of the calibre of Kelly Joe Phelps and Charlie Parr rate Eich's guitars so highly.

MULE



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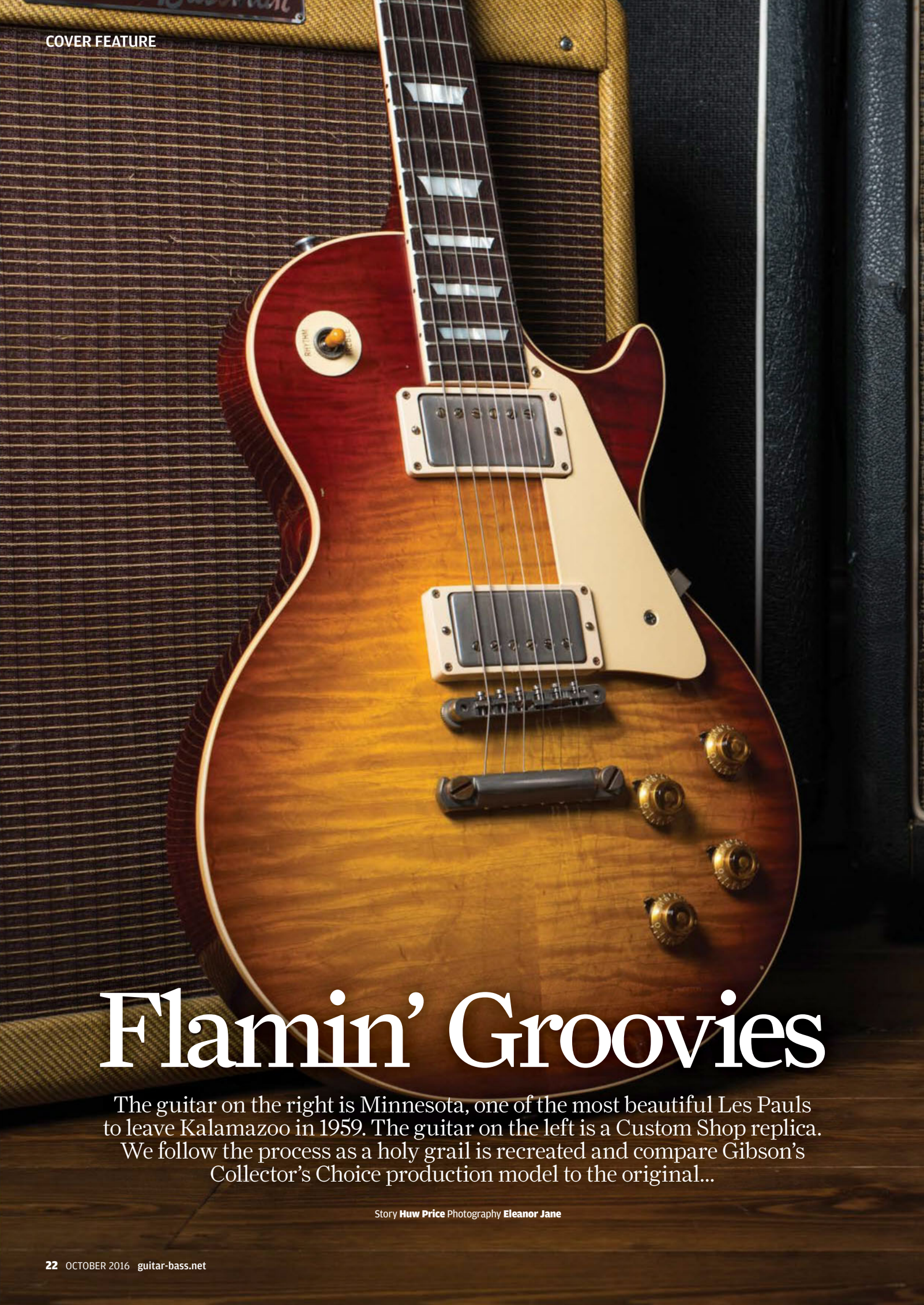


Flamin' Groovies

The guitar on the right is Minnesota, one of the most beautiful Les Pauls to leave Kalamazoo in 1959. The guitar on the left is a Custom Shop replica. We follow the process as a holy grail is recreated and compare Gibson's Collector's Choice production model to the original...

Story **Huw Price** Photography **Eleanor Jane**

So what are these Gibson Custom Collector's Choice guitars all about? The basic premise is an ongoing series of limited editions based on specific vintage models. Some of them are name-player guitars, while others have no past profile to speak of, but are superb examples nonetheless.

The recently released Minnesota Burst is #39 in the Collector's Choice Series. It's based on an original '59 belonging to private collector Andrew Raymond – who is co-owner of Vintage Guitar Boutique in Shoreditch, London. Andrew has been a good friend to *G&B* for many years, and he filled in some of his guitar's backstory for us.

The original owner was a multi-instrumentalist named Dan Moline, who bought his Les Paul (#9 1105) from a music shop in St. Cloud in central Minnesota. In addition to his duties as a sales representative of Northern States Power Company, Dan had been a professional musician since 1939, and he joined a local big band called Buddy Koopmans & His Orchestra in 1946. Believe it or not, the band is still a going concern.

Sadly, Dan died around 1990 and ownership of the guitar passed to his son. He kept the guitar until 2001, when it was acquired by a guitarist from Faribault, Minnesota called Dave Miller. Andrew put us in touch with Dave, who picked up the story.

Dave had known about the guitar since 1978, and he recalls that Dan "was an amazing guitar player and he mostly sat when he played, so there were hardly any scratches on the back". A few weeks after buying the guitar, a dealer from the Twin Cities area contacted Dave, bought it from him and sold it on to Andrew Raymond.

That's when the Les Paul crossed the Atlantic and acquired its 'Minnesota' nickname. Although not associated with a famous player, this guitar has previously featured on the cover of a stateside guitar magazine and it's hard to conceive of a better-preserved example.

Rub through on the neck shows it has been well played, but this guitar didn't suffer through the 60s and has never been subjected to any modifications. Inside the control cavity, the wiring has remained untouched since the day it left the Gibson factory.

This guitar didn't suffer through the 60s and has never been subjected to any modifications

The colour is incredibly vibrant and the edges of the sunburst are a deep reddish brown that is considerably mellower and richer than the red of later 'tomato soup' Bursts. The original frets were the earlier narrow type and were very worn. Soon after buying Minnesota, Andrew had a refret done using wider NOS 50s wire from the Gibson factory.

The only parts that have been changed are the tuners. The originals had become too stiff – probably through under-use rather than over-use – and some of the buttons had started to disintegrate. Fortunately, they're tucked away for posterity inside the original case and Minnesota now has a set of Uncle Lou replicas. The headstock was never drilled for cast tuners.

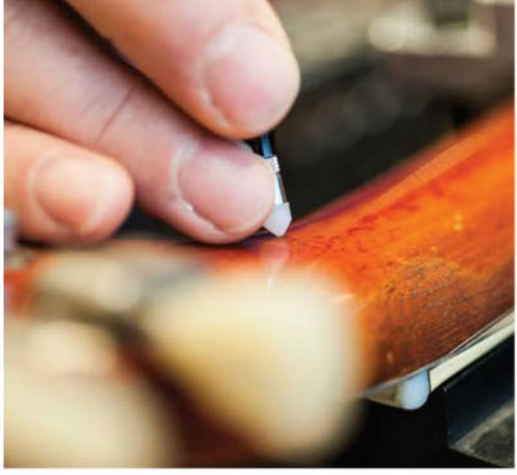
Over the years, Andrew Raymond has very kindly allowed us to examine and play some extraordinarily special vintage instruments from Vintage Guitar Boutique's stock. Among them have been several Bursts and the '57 Goldtop we featured in 2015. This has taught us that while vintage Les Pauls have common features and traits, they tend to have distinct personalities too.

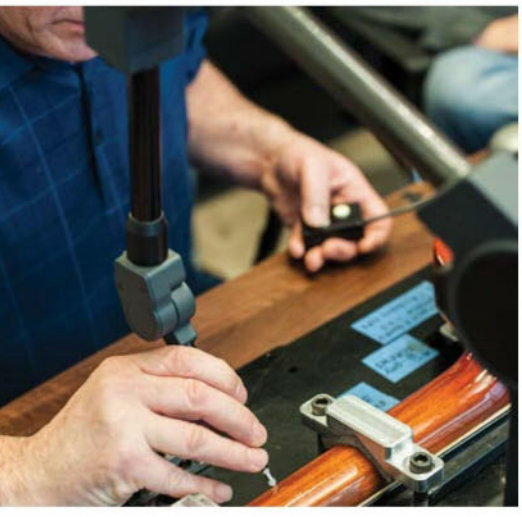
For some of the team, Minnesota is the pick of the bunch for its lightness, full but comfy neck profile, easy playing feel and its sweet, almost semi-solid tone. However, Andrew prefers one of his other Bursts and when Joe Bonamassa paid a recent visit he wasted little time in selecting Andrew's main squeeze to play at a concert in Cardiff. It illustrates that even among holy grails, players' tastes differ. We all have different ideas about what constitutes 'better'.

When Andrew told us about Gibson's plans for a Minnesota replica, we decided to take the opportunity to follow the production processes for Collector's Choice models from the initial appraisal and examination through the prototyping stages and onto the final production version. Along the way, we learned about the amount of work and attention to detail that goes into creating these guitars. If you thought the Collector's Choice series was just a clever marketing ploy, prepare to reconsider... >

Opposite **Minnesota retains an extraordinary depth of colour. The figuring is very distinctive with copious wide flames and grain lines that converge at the centre joint to form a V shape**
Below left **The lacquer checking tends to form in lines going across the grain. Minnesota's checking is a classic example and it can be seen only from certain angles**
Below right **Although it was maintained lovingly by its original owner, he also played it for decades. Though the body remains in remarkable condition, the neck lacquer is heavily worn**

Gibson
CUSTOM HIWATT 50
Fender Bassman
Marshall





Top left **The computer analyses the data to draw up a 3D image of the neck, heel and headstock. Back in the Nashville factory, Matthew will refine the data for conversion into CNC code so perfect replicas of Minnesota's neck can be machine carved**
Top centre **Matthew is using the slick plastic probe to scan the transition from the neck into the headstock curve**
Top right **Gibson's portable scanner measures hundreds of thousands of points all over the neck and sends digital information to the computer**
Above left **The probe is attached to an arm with five articulated joints and sensors in each joint**
Above right **Once all the neck and headstock readings have been completed, Minnesota is removed from the scanning frame and further measurements are taken**

Spearheaded by Gibson's Historic Program Manager Edwin Wilson, Collector's Choice models are made from select woods, and the quantity of available timber with the appropriate grain and figuring determines the number produced. Hide glue is used for the tops and the neck joint, rather than the Titebond used elsewhere in the Custom Shop, and it's preferred for its strength and vibration transfer properties.

Stretching over the best part of a year, this project took us from the heartlands of rural Wales to London, Nashville and eventually back to Wales. Gibson starts the process by scanning the instrument destined for Collector's Choice treatment, and for that we headed to London.

London

On a fine February morning, we find ourselves sipping coffee with Andrew, Edwin and Historic Program Luthier Matthew Klein at Gibson's West London HQ. Alongside us are three 1950s 'Cali Girl' cases, two of which contain '59 Les Pauls. On a large table, Minnesota is strapped onto a frame ready for its neck to be scanned. In Gibson's Nashville facility, the company uses a laser scanner, but the 'traveling system' is being used today. Matthew explains how it works: "The arm has five elbow joints and a slick plastic probe that touches the surface of the guitar. The system notes the position of each elbow joint, so each reading is analysed relative to a 'home' position. The system works it all out to determine the exact position of the sensor and the positional information is fed into a computer program that draws out a 3D representation of the neck.

Minnesota is strapped onto a frame on a large table, ready for the neck scanning process to begin

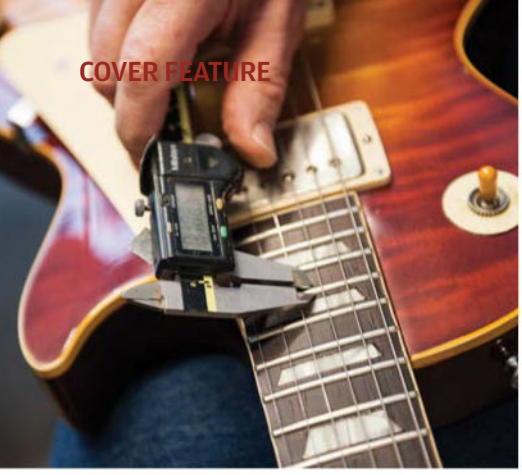
"It measures thousands of points. For instance, just on one half of the heel I have 15,000 measurement points. It's not absolutely necessary to have that many, but if I leave here and there's an issue or a flat spot shows up, I'll have to fly all the way back to the UK to do this again. We clean up the surface of the scan in the computer to get rid of any 'noise' or outlying points, then generate CNC machining code."

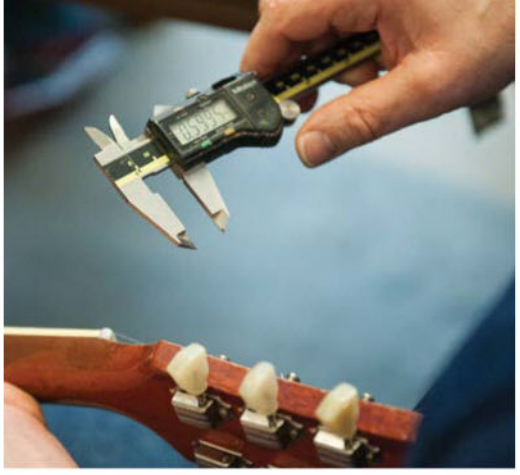
We ask if machine-carved necks are indistinguishable from the originals, and Matthew assures us they are: "The only areas that can deviate with our processes are the transitions. It's very easy to knock a corner off with even the finest sandpaper and change the character, but so far as the playing surface, heel and back of the headstock are concerned it's correct.

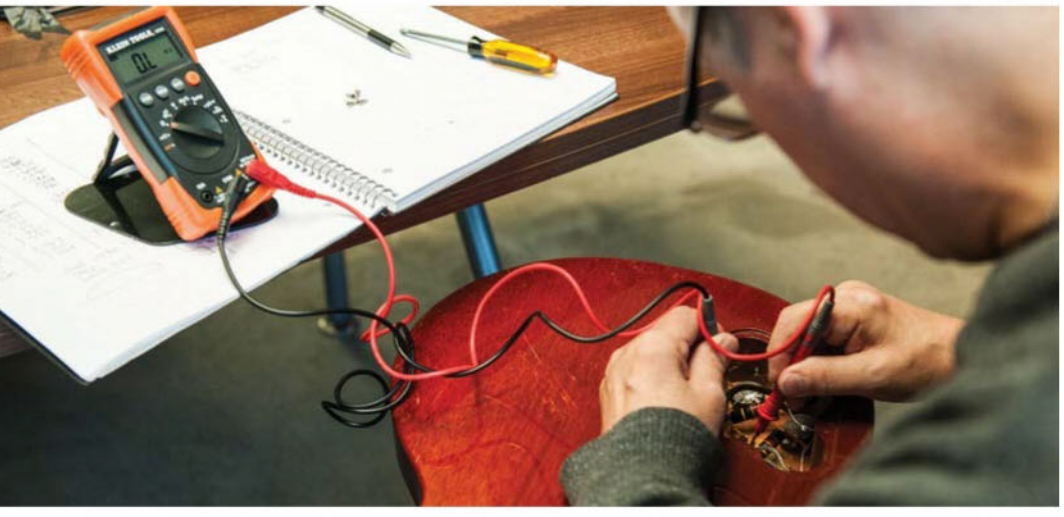
"The difficulty is if a corner is too sharp the buffing machines will rub through the lacquer, but if it's too rounded it won't look like a Gibson.

"The level of accuracy is mind-blowing because it can pick up dimples that are less that half a thousandth of an inch. We can take a similar approach with the top carve if it's going to be a feature of that model. Like Billy Gibbons' Pearly Gates for example, because it has a pronounced shape on the edge."

Having been impressed with Gibson's fastidious approach to neck profiling, we wonder if other aspects of the builds receive as much attention. Since most of the original Bursts were lighter than later ones, does Gibson shoot for a vintage-correct weight? Edwin selects and buys the wood, so he >







Top left **By and large, Gibson's Collector's Choice models are replicas of instruments in their current condition rather than as new. Minnesota has been refretted with vintage, late-'59 spec Gibson fretwire, which is slightly wider than that used on early Goldtops and Bursts**
Top centre **Edwin carefully measures all the headstock dimensions with digital callipers**
Top right **Further calliper readings are taken of neck depth at specific points and Edwin makes detailed notes**
Above left **To ensure accurate readings, Edwin measures the DC resistance of the pickups with the black tip on a ground point and the red tip on the input tag of the volume potentiometer. This ensures the readings aren't skewed by the controls**
Above right **With Minnesota returned to its case, the Gibson guys head back to Nashville**

gives us some insights. "Most of the stuff we're doing now is very light mahogany, and part of that is the fact that it comes from Fiji as opposed to South America," he says. "It's classified as a true mahogany, but it's actually quite a bit lighter than Honduras. We use hand-picked Indian rosewood for the fingerboards. We don't pick wood out on how it sounds and feels when you cut it, but as long as it is vibrant and it amplifies when you touch it, it's good."

The Collector's Choice models are replicas of old, and well-played instruments, so Gibson uses a variety of techniques to achieve an aged look. Edwin kindly shares some secrets with *G&B*: "We'll oxidise the wood using chemicals that are common in the woodworking industry, and the lacquer checking is done with razor blades. Although Fender is starting to do some razor stuff, over the years they've mostly sprayed something called airplane lacquer, and it dries incredibly hard. Then they'll use compressed air to crack it. The problem is it shatters the lacquer, and that's not realistic-looking for us. From the very first guitars Tom Murphy started working on, it has been all about recreating the look of an aged Gibson, and the only way you can do that really is with a razor."

While we're chatting, Matthew finishes the surprisingly long and thorough scanning procedure and hands Minnesota to Edwin for further measurements while he backs up the data. In contrast, Edwin's approach is reassuringly analogue as he takes careful measurements all over Minnesota's neck and body and writes down everything down in a notebook with a biro.

According to Edwin Wilson, Minnesota's neck humbucker "could be the hottest PAF ever"

Part of the documentation process involves Edwin removing the control cover and taking pickup readings. The results are surprising, with the bridge pickup reading a fairly standard 7.59k but the neck topping the scale at 8.8k. According to Edwin, it "could be the hottest PAF ever". This leads into a discussion about current production PAF replicas and capacitors, which are clearly subjects close to Edwin's heart.

"Usually, what I'll do on these lines is measure the output of the pickup and use whatever's closest to that. Most of them end up being Custom Buckers. When we did the Jimmy Page model, that was the first time we made a specific pickup for a guitar. I asked him if he wanted the same pickups used in the '91 model and he said those were the worst pickups ever. He hated those things. So I measured his vintage pickups, and I wound something that was similar to what his guitar sounds like currently.

"So our Custom Buckers are loosely based on the pickups I made for him. The coils are mismatched and they're unpotted, but the output is a little different. The range we use goes from about 7.6k to about 8.3k. The tone capacitors, currently, are not paper and oil, we're using mylar and foil caps that are really high-quality but in a bumblebee shell and wired 50s-style off the output of the volume pot. I've been working with a vendor on some paper and oil ones for a year or so. We're close, but we're not quite there yet." >

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RHYTHM
Marsha

Above **One of the Collector's Choice #39 production models on the bench at Gibson Custom's Nashville factory in June** *Opposite* **The second prototype's flame isn't as vivid as the production model's, but Gibson went a bit heavier on the relic'ing, as can been seen from the rusted tailpiece studs and more liberal use of oxidising agents**

As he's looking at the computer scan, Matthew calls us over to check out something remarkable. Looking at a cross-section at the first fret, he reveals that Minnesota's neck is symmetrical to within 0.25mm. Considering that all vintage Gibson necks were hand-carved, it demonstrates a breathtaking degree of skill. "There was great consistency too," Matthew explains. "Some of the necks were absolutely identical. I tried a Rick Nielsen template on a different neck that we were copying and it could only have been made by the same guy."

In recent years, a sizeable replica parts industry has developed. Gibson is fully aware of this and Edwin has been instrumental in raising the company's game in this regard. Gibson is now making many of its own parts, and they are more vintage-accurate than ever before. After all, it's a point of pride because Gibson designed and made the parts in the first place. Edwin takes us through the recent changes.

"The tailpiece is aluminium and it was the first vintage part we reissued. Since then, we've done the bridges and saddles. We buy in our machineheads, but in 2015 we re-tooled our pickup covers, the plastics and everything. From doing the tailpiece in 2000, we decided we wouldn't guess anymore about what the parts should look like or what they were made out of. So we got original parts and copied them. We even have the materials analysed in a lab, because that sort of information doesn't really exist at Gibson in the engineering notes.

"Lou Gatanas, of Uncle Lou's Classic Guitars, and I worked really hard together on the plastics, pickup covers and the parts. So from 2015, the switch tips have been Catalin and the flat plastics are ABS, like the originals. We did 3D scans of a set of original pickup rings and they're butyrate like the knobs. The knobs are hand-painted and the gold that's on them is the same gold that we use on our Goldtops, just like Gibson did in the 50s. They'll even fluoresce under black light.

Edwin's approach is reassuringly analogue as he takes measurements all over Minnesota's neck and body

"All the flat plastics are laminated, so the pickguard is actually six-ply, and to find a company in the US that would laminate ABS was amazingly difficult. Nobody does that anymore. Eventually, we found a company that still had its old tooling, and they agreed to try. It took them about six months to figure out how to do it again. So now they do the pickguards, the four-ply jack plates and the three-ply toggle washer."

With that, we're done for the day. The guys explain that back at the Gibson factory, Matthew will take responsibility for programming the CNC machine, prototyping the neck and ironing out bugs. Eventually, a prototype will be put together and shipped to Andrew for comments and approval. We wonder about the timescale.

"Right now, we have a lot of guitars that are documented and on the schedule," Edwin tells us, "but that doesn't mean that Minnesota won't go into production this year. Say I'm on a wood-buying trip and I come across 150 tops that look like Minnesota's, this guitar will move straight to the front of the line."

Prototypes and production

Edwin and Matthew fly back to Nashville the following day and the waiting begins. At this point, none of us has any idea how long it will take or even when the first prototype will materialise. Fortunately, everything happens quickly, and by early May the prototype has arrived. >

Top left **Note the colour contrast between the pickguard and the pickup ring on Minnesota. The gap between the bridge side of the ring and the pickguard is typical of Les Pauls of this era**
Top right **Minnesota's poker chip has worn and faded lettering, and you can see the tooling marks around its edge**
Above left **The switch tips are now being made from the correct type of plastic and the colour looks good. Unlike Minnesota's, the poker chip on the production model has no lettering, but the edges are authentically rough**
Above right **Gibson's improved plastic parts are closer to the originals than ever before. The ring/guard gap here on the production model isn't as accentuated as it is on either the second prototype or the original, but the pickup covers look great, even if they'll need some playing time before they acquire the same patina as Minnesota's**

Andrew gives us the call, and it's a classic case of 'close but no cigar'. On the plus side, the first prototype's neck is a dead ringer for Minnesota's and has a similarly lightweight and easy-playing feel. In fact, it plays just as nicely as the original with a very similar acoustic voice.

The most obvious difference between the real thing and first protoype is that the outer edges of the sunburst are too red and 'tomato soup-y', and the binding isn't yellow enough. We also notice that Gibson hasn't reliplicated the wear on the bass side of the neck. Photos are taken, emails are written and Andrew sends our feedback off to Nashville.

Edwin clearly got lucky on a timber-buying trip soon after and we didn't have to wait too long for Minnesota to go into production after all. *G&B* editor Chris Vinnicombe paid the Gibson Custom factory a visit while he was in Nashville covering Summer NAMM in June, where there were Minnesota Bursts in final assembly that very day. By July, Collector's Choice #39 had hit the shops and Andrew had taken possession of prototype number two and the very first model to roll off the production line.

So how does it stack up?

Although we now turn our attention to the production model, what follows differs slightly from a regular *G&B* review. We always assess build quality, playing experience, tone, aesthetic appeal, and we'll cover those same bases here. However, the crucial difference is that the production model will be judged against the guitar it's purported to replicate, as well as on its own merits.

This begs the question 'is it fair to compare a £7,599 guitar with one that's worth about as much as a suburban semi-detached house?'. We think it's justified because all of the raw materials that went into making Les Pauls back in the 1950s are still available. The vertigo-inducing value of vintage Les Pauls actually comes from their association with seminal recordings and their extreme rarity rather than solid gold hardware, diamond inlays or other such exotica.

You might say that it's all about the tone, because it's popularly imagined that age has somehow 'seasoned' the original instruments. But we're not convinced that's a valid argument. The Les Pauls that Peter Green, Eric Clapton and Mike Bloomfied played in the 60s were less than a decade old, yet the records are proof they sounded incredible. Besides which, there are plenty of 70s guitars that sound just as dull and lifeless now as they did when new. Age alone guarantees nothing. If the Beano Burst resurfaced tomorrow, we're not convinced it would sound better now than it did 50 years ago.

You could get into minutiae such as neck profiles, weight and appearance and you'd be on safer ground. The real Bursts we've played have knocked our socks off – not because of their value but because they feel utterly fantastic and the PAF pickups from that era have never been bettered. Of course, the patina and historic significance intensifies the thrill, but they're sublime guitars because of the way they were made in the >

MINNESOTA

KEY FEATURES

Minnesota

- **BUILD** One-piece Honduran mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard with celluloid markers and 22 frets, holly peghead overlay
- **HARDWARE** No-wire ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium tailpiece, Uncle Lou replica tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two original double white PAF pickups measuring 8.8k (neck) 7.59k (bridge), original 500k pots, paper/oil bumblebee capacitors, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.61"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.75mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at ninth fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 37.5mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.2lbs/3.7kg

PROTOTYPE #2

KEY FEATURES

Prototype #2

- **BUILD** One-piece Fijian mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Indian rosewood fingerboard with pearloid markers and 22 frets, holly peghead overlay
- **HARDWARE** No-wire ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium tailpiece, Kluson Deluxe replica tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two Custom Bucker PAF replica pickups measuring 8.5k (neck) 7.86k (bridge), 500k pots, mylar/foil bumblebee capacitors, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.61"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at ninth fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36.5mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.65lbs/3.92Kg

PRODUCTION MODEL

KEY FEATURES

Collector's Choice #39

- **BUILD** One-piece Fijian mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Indian rosewood fingerboard with pearloid markers and 22 frets, holly peghead overlay
- **HARDWARE** No-wire ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium tailpiece, Kluson Deluxe replica tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two Custom Bucker PAF replica pickups measuring 8.42k (neck) 7.94k (bridge), 500k pots, mylar/foil bumblebee capacitors, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.61"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.75mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22.5mm at first fret, 24.5mm at ninth fret, 25mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.7lbs/3.94kg

Gibson has nailed the brownish red around the edges of the burst on this production model

The neck wear has been replicated on the treble side but not the bass side

Minnesota is in such great condition you can count the chips in its top on one hand

first place, not because of the way they've aged.

There is no longer as much mystery about 50s Les Pauls, because every single aspect of their construction has been analysed and understood. Gibson has all the resources, materials and personnel it needs to make Les Pauls in the 21st century that are every bit as good as the 50s ones. That's why we're not going to fawn all over Minnesota and we're not going to pull any punches on the production model. Let's start by examining how the looks of the production model compare with Minnesota's.

Gibson certainly nailed the sunburst, and the figuring closely resembles Minnesota's. Short of applying a photo transfer on the production models, it couldn't have got much closer given the vagaries of natural materials. The edge shade is really quite remarkable, but the centre is just a tad yellower and the binding a bit lighter on the production model. Minnesota's clear coats are more amber, but a few hours' sunbathing would surely help the production model to close the gap. Although restrained, it has extra lacquer checking that's more obvious. Minnesota's checking can be seen only from certain angles, just like its flames, which Gibson has got just right. Without stain to make the grain pop, the top can look quite plain from some angles, then as you twist it and the light bounces from a different angle, the flames leap right out. This pseudo-holographic effect is a hallmark of the real deal, and clearly Gibson can still deliver the goods.

The company has replicated the wear pattern on the treble side but not the bass side of the neck, so that aspect of our feedback must have got lost somewhere in the mid-Atantic. There's a large lacquer-free patch, and the wood feels as if it has a protective coating with a slightly greyed-up look to simulate oxidised timber. Minnesota has more dark/light contrast between the middle and end areas of the neck, but the deep cherry colour looks gorgeous and the restrained ageing on the back is confined to lacquer checking and a few minor dents. This is in keeping with the original, which is in great shape and has no buckle rash.

Although the production model's plastics and hardware show minimal signs of distress, Minnesota's original knobs appear virtually new and the hardware is only a good buff-up away from looking the same. Visually, Gibson has done an impressive job, and although on close inspection the production model looks aged rather than genuinely old, there were still several comedy moments during photography when we had to check the serial numbers to distinguish Minnesota from the prototype and production model.

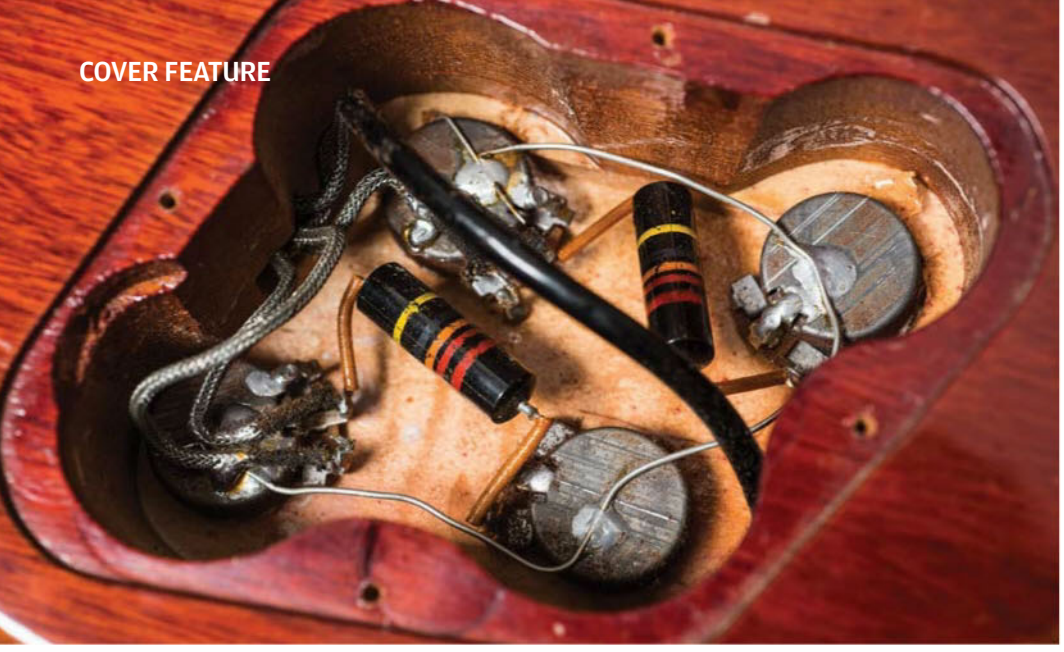
In use

Moving on to the overall feel, it's really no exaggeration to state that if blindfolded and handed all three guitars in turn, we don't believe we could tell which was which from the neck profiles alone. Although the measurements might reveal minute differences, the necks are, for all practical purposes, identical. The guitars also feel very similar, with a nicely worn-in quality and slinky, easy-bending action.

When we begin playing, subtle differences begin to manifest. Acoustically, Minnesota falls bang in the middle between the second prototype and the production model, with a meaty low-mid growl, slightly recessed mids and airy treble. The prototype has the airy treble quality without the growl, while the production model does the low-midrange thing without the wide-open treble chime. Minnesota also has a resonant and almost semi-solid quality, with very long sustain. Single notes played high up the neck sound sweet and have a lot of body behind them.

The production model has a fatter midrange tone than the prototype and, like Minnesota, it combines fat but crisp low notes with tons of sustain but not quite as much twang. If we were reviewing the production model on its own, we'd be over the moon with it because it's an outstanding Les Paul that more than holds its own with the vintage examples we've played.

The prototype sounds a tiny bit closer to Minnesota unplugged, with slightly scooped mids and a more delicately nuanced treble. But we're really splitting hairs because all three have outstanding natural tone. And while they all sound different, we can't identify any one of them as being clearly superior to the others. >



Top left **This is exactly how Minnesota left the factory. The bumblebees are the original paper in oil types, too**
Top right **The silk screen 'Les Paul Model' print has faded on Minnesota's headstock and the ambered clear coats give the logo a golden look**
Above left **The truss rod cover looks really good on the production model. The silk screen is a lot brighter and the Gibson logo looks silvery under the un-tinted clear lacquer**
Above right **The production version has an R9 stamp in the cavity and you can see the unused ground wire hole next to the neck pickup's volume pot. The wiring looks very similar but the bumblebee caps are the modern mylar foil types**

Special thanks to Andrew Raymond and Vintage Guitar Boutique for making this feature possible. Visit the store online at vintageguitarboutique.com to see a fine collection of vintage and new instruments on sale.

We've dwelt on the playing feel and acoustic tone because there's nothing much you can do to improve those, and we're pleased to report that the production model passes with flying colours. It is perhaps all too predicable that Minnesota gets its nose in front when amplifiers are involved, so given the extreme similarities in playing feel and acoustic tone, the focus of attention shifts to the pickups.

The production model has a muscular, aggressive midrange but it's comparatively rolled off in the deep lows and upper harmonics. Nevertheless, these pickups have a very articulate bite with a discernable bloom, but the ethereal shifting harmonic thing synonymous with original PAFs doesn't quite happen, perhaps because the 'air' frequencies in question aren't really there.

The Custom Buckers clean up without losing clarity, but you can't get them to do woody jazziness, jangle or a 'Tele on steroids' trick. The production model has more of a cocked wah rock voicing, whereas Minnesota is a better all-rounder that's thicker, clearer, brighter, more dynamic and versatile. The production model would be a stellar guitar for a rock gig, but Minnesota could get you through a set of covers, blues standards or even a jazz engagement.

The production model has a muscular, aggressive midrange & cleans up without losing clarity

The Custom Buckers are just as good as many of the boutique PAF pretenders we've tried. There are a handful of PAF replicas that sound closer to original 50s units – we discovered that installing a set of Monty's PAFs can send the sonic performance of a Collector's Choice Les Paul into the stratosphere when working on a friend's Greg Martin Collector's Choice #15.

Considering their price, you might argue that owners shouldn't be obliged to 'upgrade' Collector's Choice instruments at all. However, the point is that they're not. Without the original Minnesota and the Monty-fied Greg Martin on hand to compare, it's doubtful that we would feel anything was missing here. It was certainly worth the wait, but is it worth the money? If you can afford it, you could consider this model either an expensive option or a substantial saving. Either way, it looks, feels and sounds like the real deal, and it's every ounce a real Gibson. It seems they do make 'em like they used to after all.

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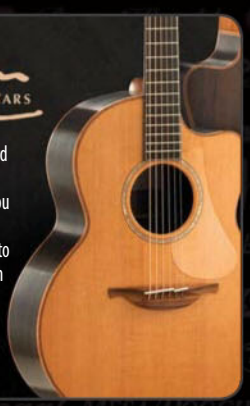

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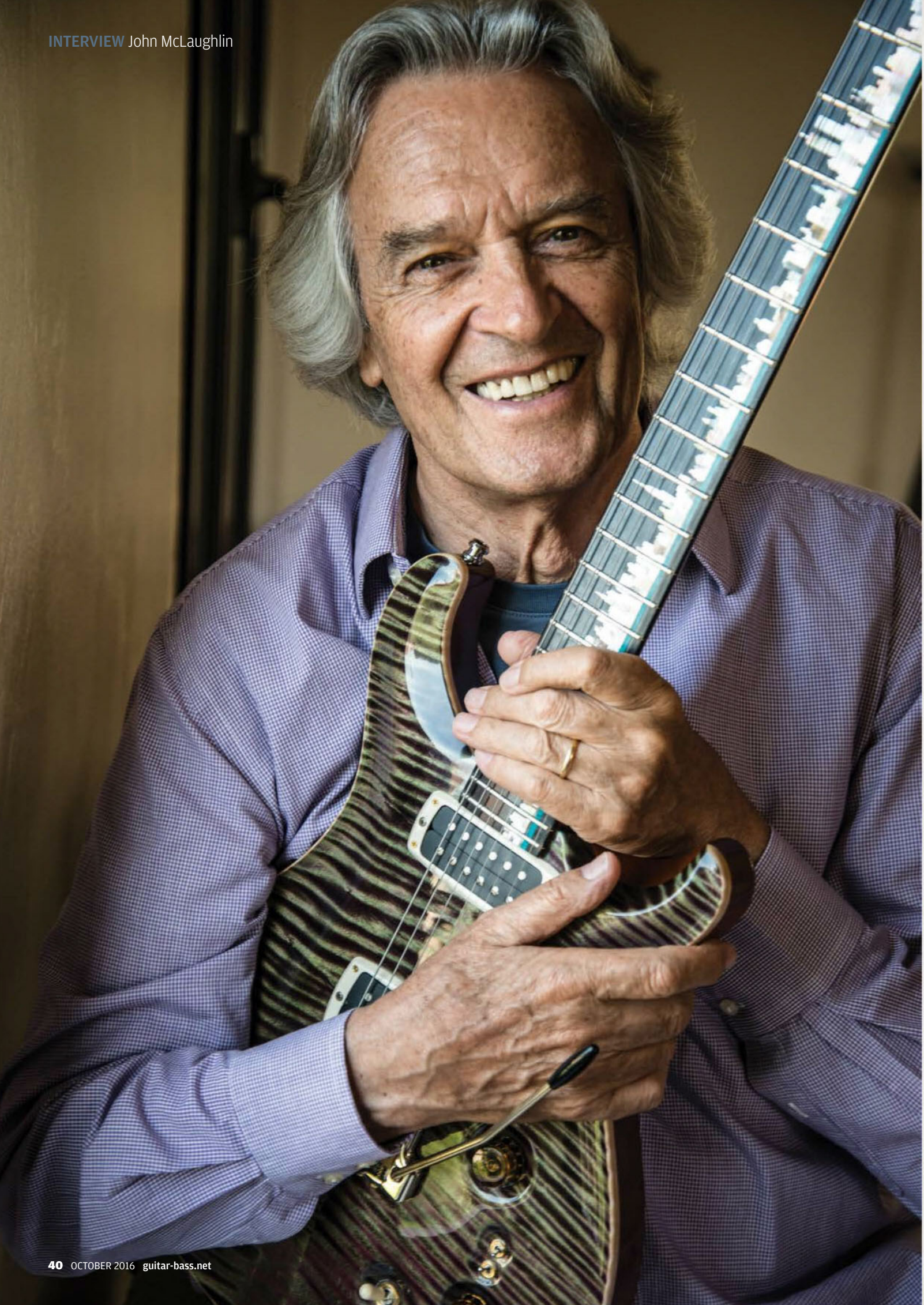


JOHN MCLAUGHLIN
How I got started...

John on the spot

G&B hears how serendipity played its part in propelling John McLaughlin's career into the musical stratosphere, alongside legends such as Miles Davis, Jimmy Page and Ginger Baker

Story **David Gallant**

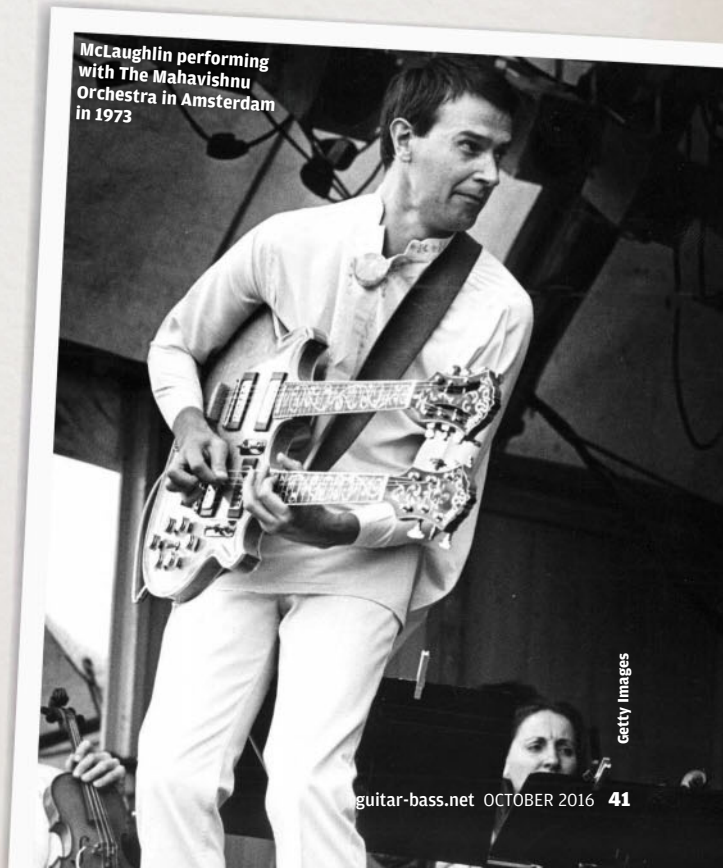
"I was 11 when I first got my hands on a guitar," says jazz maestro John McLaughlin. "It was love at first touch, it really was. But that first guitar was really crappy – an old acoustic banger, a really cheap imitation of a Dobro. My eldest brother brought it back from university one time [McLaughlin is one of five children]. But he very quickly got bored with it and, after about six months, gave it to one of my other brothers. He started playing and he got bored with it too, so it eventually landed in my arms.

"My family could see that I was very enamoured with the guitar – somebody finally liked it enough to make their fingers bleed! Thinking about it, I was very lucky, because my older brothers were totally into the blues boom that was sweeping the UK in the early 50s, and they would bring home Big Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters records, and then of course I would go out and get my own – Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Son House, etc..."

McLaughlin bought his first record in 1954: "I was 12 years old, and it was a Muddy Waters album. He was playing acoustic slide guitar, with Little Walter on harmonica. You remember – *Forty Days And Forty Nights*, *Got My Mojo Working*... great songs. Then one day, I must have been about 13 or 14, one of my brothers brought home a flamenco record and it just blew my mind. It was Sabicas, one of the greats. Then there was this guy, Alan Lomax, who had a programme on BBC Radio Two in the early 50s, where he was going between the Tennessee Mountains, the Appalachian Mountains and the depths of Pakistan, and recording everybody and their grandmother, in fact anybody who was any good. And one day he played some South Indian temple music that made my hair stand on end. Absolutely amazing. It was played on a reed instrument called the nadaswaram, along with a fantastic tabla player. And that's come right in the middle... the blues hit me, the flamenco hit me and the Indian music hit me and then... Django Reinhardt. That really twisted me and spun my head around, and when I heard Miles Davis and Coltrane that was it, my heart and soul."

When McLaughlin was 15, he was just about able to scrape together enough money to buy a Hofner electric guitar. "I formed a band with a few school friends who were also jazz fans, and fortunately we had an enlightened music teacher who would invite us to play for the class, which was wonderful – even though it was a nerve-racking experience. But it was great because he didn't care what kind of music we were playing, as long as we were playing music." By the time McLaughlin was 16 he was sneaking into his local pubs. "On a Saturday or Sunday night they'd have a jazz band and I'd pretend I was 18 and go over to the band and ask them if I could sit in," he says. "I tell you, I got burnt so badly at the beginning... 'okay young kid, let's start off with *Cherokee* at a billion miles an hour and you take the first solo'. I'd go home with my tail between my legs! But what an experience. I think I learned more from those jam sessions in the first few months when I was 16 than I would have with a year of practising. But after a few months, and you know I was really opestering these people, they would start to invite me. And eventually I got a gig."

That same year, McLaughlin left home and got a job touring with Big Pete Deuchar and his Professors of Ragtime. "It was New Orleans jazz, but he was very open-minded," says John. "I was trying to play like Miles and Coltrane, very badly of course, but he didn't >



McLaughlin performing with The Mahavishnu Orchestra in Amsterdam in 1973

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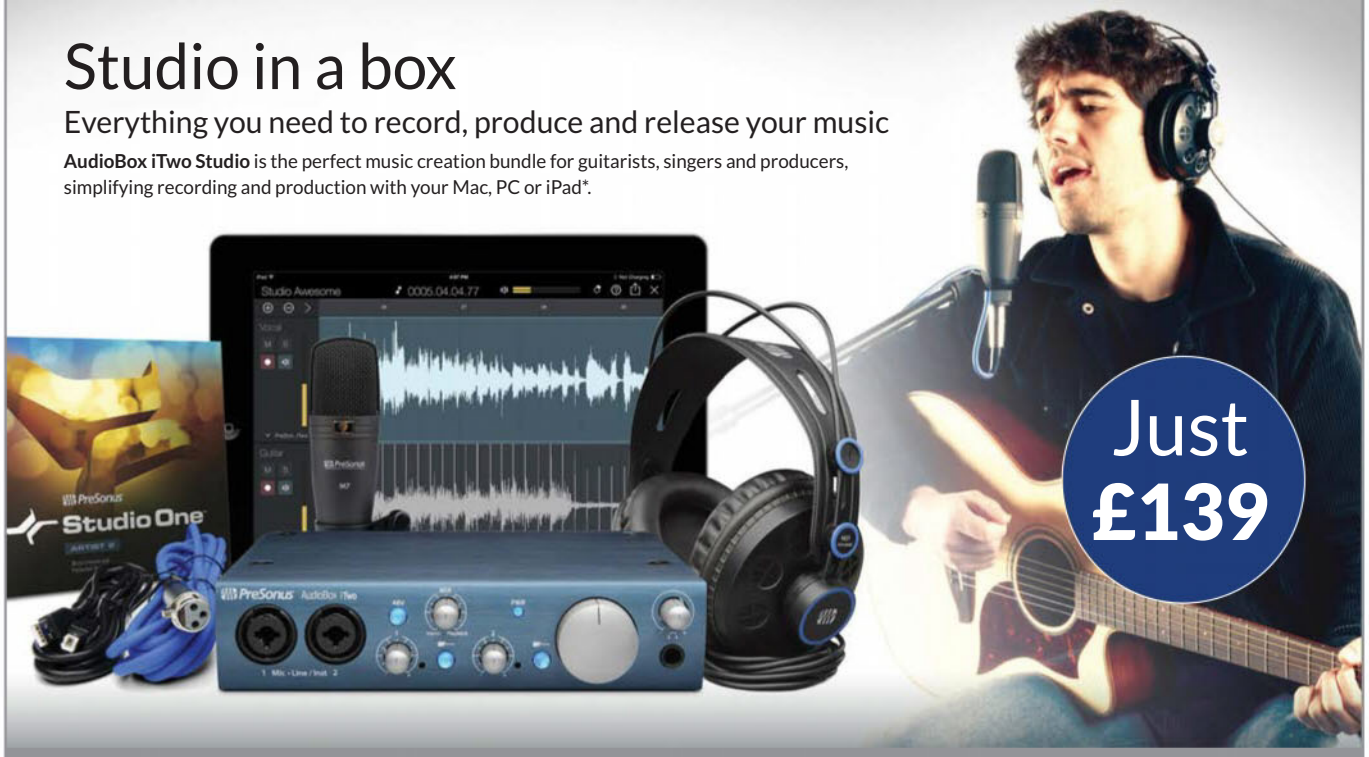

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McLaughlin playing his PRS Private Stock Violin guitar

care. He just said 'go for it'. So for about a year I toured with him, and eventually ended up in London, where I starved for a while, getting a gig here and a gig there."

McLaughlin ultimately landed the guitar seat with Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames. "This would have been around 1961-62, the very early days," he recalls, "and that was a fantastic situation to be in, because at the beginning of the 60s, rhythm & blues really started to hit, and then Motown came along and it was a revelation for everybody. That whole Detroit sound, black music coming into mainstream pop music... Georgie was singing King Pleasure, Mose Allison – it was really jazz-infused rhythm & blues. We were the 'house band' down at The Flamingo [in London's Soho], where after midnight it became the 'all-nighter'. Sometimes at the weekend we'd do the evening show and then sometimes the 'all-nighter', it was brutal. Then there was the scene at The 100 Club with Alexis Korner and John Mayall – between The Flamingo and The 100 Club there was a lot of moving around. Everybody played with Alexis, he got everybody together. He was like fusion personified. Mick Jagger, Charlie Watts, Jack Bruce and Cyril Davies, they all either sang or played in Alexis' band. And everyone got on well. Nobody thought about 'do you belong in this band?' – the whole musical scene was fantastic. Alexis loved 50s blues, but he always had jazzmen in his band. I jammed with Alexis I don't know how many times... I'll never forget, at that time I was playing a really great early 60s Telecaster... it was a beauty, a real beauty. Alexis was crazy about that guitar, so I sold it to him and that's when I got my Gibson L-4."

McLaughlin eventually left the Blue Flames to go with Jack Bruce, Ginger Baker and Graham Bond: "It was musically much more challenging with Graham. It was still very strong R&B, but if you take the R&B out of jazz, you don't have very much jazz left, do you really? We were starving – making next to nothing. But The Graham Bond Organisation was a great little band. Eventually, the GBO broke up, and then because I could read music, I started doing a lot of studio work alongside guys like Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones. Remember 1966-67 and all of those hits – Donovan, Sandie Shaw, Petula Clark, Tom Jones, Engelbert Humperdinck – it was the first time I had some money in my pocket! You know, Jimmy and I go back a long time. I was 18 when I met him and he must have been about 15. I was living in Surrey and we happened to be neighbours. I gave him guitar lessons!"

> "I was 18 when I met Jimmy Page, and he must have been 15. I gave him guitar lessons!"

McLaughlin realised that for studio work he needed an acoustic flat top that had a more clear and singing tone than his L-4. "So I bought a Gibson Hummingbird. Actually, I also needed the money. I was broke, really broke, and somebody I knew said 'I'll give you a really good price for the Gibson L-4... 'cos, you know, you have to eat'. I did the studio work for about 18 months before I left. I felt I was dying. But after I left the session world I became poor again. I was running with several different bands, including a little trio with Danny Thompson, and playing with Brian Auger."

McLaughlin was also hanging out and 'kipping down' at jazz bassist Dave Holland's flat: "One day, Dave says 'Bill Evans is coming into town'. I knew of Bill from Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue* album, and Jack DeJohnette's playing drums and he wants to jam. Well, we went down there to Ronnie Scott's in the afternoon – this must have been some time in the summer of '68 – and we jammed with just Dave on upright bass and drums and guitar, and we had a fantastic time. What I didn't realise, though, was that Jack had recorded it on one of these Mission Impossible tape recorders [laughs] with the little wheels going round and round." >

"Then, a few months later, I get a call from Dave. He said 'I've got somebody here who wants to talk to you'. And it turns out Dave had Tony Williams [drummer] on the phone. Tony was on that *Miles Davis In Europe* record in '64 when he was 18 years old – unbelievable. And Tony said 'I'm putting a trio together and I want you to join'. He said: 'Yeah, Jack DeJohnette played me a tape of you and Dave and I want you to come over to New York', and I said, 'wow, that's fantastic. And God bless Ronnie Scott, because Ronnie helped organise a visa to get me over to America, which was difficult in those days. So I arrived in New York right after my birthday in January 1969. Tony picked me up, I think I had about five pence in my pocket – old pence – I was so broke. And I remember, Dave loaned me $20. He was camping out in Mike and Randy Brecker's apartment. So I moved into Randy and Mike's apartment, which was okay, as they were on tour with Horace Silver.

"That night, I got to see Tony play and I got to meet Miles. Tony had to finish a week off at this club up in Harlem. I was in heaven, I tell you, I was in heaven. The next day, I got to meet Miles again and he invited me to come along to the *In A Silent Way* session. I mean, how lucky can you get? Unbelievable. Here I am playing with Tony's band and I'm recording with Miles Davis! And eventually, of course, I started doing gigs with Miles. When he was recording *In A Silent Way*, I could see he was at a transition point. He wanted more R&B – can you believe it? He was moving more towards Sly And The Family Stone and James Brown – like me, that's what I was listening to in the 60s. Anyway, I'd passed the acid test on *In A Silent Way*, so Miles started to invite me to his house and always bring my guitar. So by the time we did *Bitches Brew*, I knew him much better. He was an amazing human being and an amazing artist, too. He was so funny, he had this amazing sense of humour. When we recorded *Bitches Brew*, in my opinion Miles really didn't know what he wanted, but he knew what he didn't want.

> "Miles Davis was an amazing human being and an amazing artist. I got so much from Miles"

"The way he set up the sessions... he'd give a key and he'd sing a rhythm, just really simple. The drummer would start playing and the bass player would start playing, and we'd set up something and he'd kind of tweak it as we went along to the point where he really liked it and we'd hit a groove, then he'd start playing. He wanted more and more R&B, and he loved wah. You know, I got so much from Miles with him nudging me here and there."

McLaughlin, however, was still playing with Tony Williams and famously wielding that double-neck axe. "I called Gibson and I said, 'I understand you do a double-neck and I'd really like a double-neck'. Of course, there were no chorus pedals in those days, just amps and wah pedals, and that was it. And the 12-string was great for chords and arpeggios, and so they built me an SG double-neck and that was the guitar I had on my very first hit. You know, Tony was always encouraging me to write more and more music, 'cos he really liked what I wrote. I guess a big part of Mahavishnu music began developing with Tony Williams' *Lifetime*."

Then, in the fall of 1970, McLaughlin recalls he had just finished a gig near Boston with Miles at a club called Lenny's On The Turnpike: "Hey, what a name! And Miles turned to me and he said, 'it's time you formed your own band John'.

"I had to do it, if just to justify his belief in me. Ironically, I got a call about a month later from the bass player, Miroslav Vitous – he and I were very close. He called me and said 'I'm forming a band with Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul, called Weather Report, and we'd love you to be in it'. I thought, 'wow, that's great, but I'm under orders!' And of course I had to tell him 'Miles has told me to form my own band, so I'm doing it!'"

Early the following year, the Mahavishnu Orchestra was born, the legacy of which is still alive today in the form of The 4th Dimension, where McLaughlin continues to expand his creative horizons and explore new musical pathways. Listen to his recent album *Black Light* for some serious enlightenment.

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Crowd Pleaser

More and more artists are turning to crowdfunding to stay afloat in an increasingly cut-throat music industry. From the hair metal scene to session work, launching her own label and fan-funded albums, Janet Robin's story is an inspiration to DIY musicians everywhere

Story **Thea De Gallier** Photography **Mary Grace McKernan**

The term 'crowdfunding' had barely entered the popular vernacular when Janet Robin first decided to ask her fans to help finance an album. It was 2009, and the singer-songwriter had been releasing material under her own label for the last 15 years. At first, the thought of going solo was a daunting one; until she started Little Sister Records in the mid-90s, Robin had always been part of a band. At 18, she dropped out of college to join Precious Metal, who enjoyed a seven-year run as one of Sunset Strip's mid-level hair metal bands. Rather than retreat into a life of relative normality when they were dropped from their label in 1990, Robin threw herself into session work. A stint in Lindsey Buckingham's backing band followed, then work with Meredith Brooks and Michelle Shocked, and support slots with the likes of Heart and Air Supply. Last year, she was hand-picked to teach Jennifer Jason Leigh to play guitar for her role in the Tarantino blockbuster *The Hateful*

Eight. Robin's first crowdfunding campaign, for her 2010 album *Everything Has Changed* raised $20,000 using only PayPal and a PO box, to which fans could send her cheques. "I had a good amount of fans by that point," she explains. Her second crowdfunded album, *Take Me As I Am*, produced by Johnny Cash and June Carter's only son John Carter Cash, is due out in September. Robin's remarkable approach to crowdfunding – eschewing the big platforms in favour of setting up a PayPal-enabled donation page on her website – will doubtless raise eyebrows among sceptics of crowd-based project funding. Ever since Marillion became the unofficial pioneers of the model in 1996, when they raised $60,000 for their North American tour the following year, crowdfunding has been equally lauded as a new frontier for the music industry, and derided as exploitative.

It isn't hard to see where the criticism comes from; crowdfunding advocate Amanda Palmer took the model to extremes in 2012 by not only asking fans to donate, but for them to put her up in their homes during her tour. More recently, smaller bands have developed a habit of turning to crowdfunding to raise cash for things with less-tangible benefits for fans. British prog-metallers Monuments are a case in point; they played the Australian festival Soundwave shortly before it went bankrupt and closed for good amid a dispute over payment. Five months after their manager created a GoFundMe campaign for fans to help them make up an alleged cash shortfall relating to their booking, it's still not even halfway towards its £14,000 goal.

"Everyone's doing it now, and it's getting watered down," says Robin. "When I crowdfund, you're basically pre-ordering my record. If you're a fan, you're either going to buy it at a show or online, so why not get it ahead of time? The pre-orders fund the recording, the engineers and the mixing. You're not funding me to go to Nashville and go drinking every night. I buy my plane tickets on my credit card, and all the money goes towards recording." For Janet, ensuring that her campaigns never cross the line between professional and personal is the key to her success. "People might think, 'why should I pay for you to be a musician? You figure that out!' Well, I have figured it out," she laughs. "In between doing my social media and PR, booking gigs and hotels and renting cars, I'm teaching guitar, because I've got to pay my bills."

Robin hasn't always been the one-woman operation she is now, but she was always going to be a guitarist. At nine years old, she was the youngest, and only female, pupil of legendary Quiet Riot and Ozzy Osbourne axeman Randy Rhoads, who taught her up until he left for his first tour with Ozzy. "My 1978 Les Paul Custom that I got while taking lessons with Randy is the guitar dearest to me," says Robin. "He didn't care that I was a girl. Either you played good or you didn't." She remembers being told the news of Rhoads' death in a plane crash in 1982 by a teacher in high school, and wondering momentarily how she'd continue pursuing her dream without her trusted mentor. "Things seemed a little unknown," she says. "But I loved the guitar. I wasn't going to stop." Two years later, she dropped out of school to join Precious Metal. A record deal with Mercury followed, and for the next six years, Robin's life was a whirlwind of industry dinners and gigs on Sunset Strip.

Robin's solo engagements are all-acoustic affairs, and she relies on her Taylor DCSM

> "My 1978 Les Paul Custom I got while taking lessons with Randy Rhoads is the guitar dearest to me"

She admits she was shocked when Precious Metal were released from their second deal with Capitol, and that striking out on her own hadn't crossed her mind. "When you got signed back then, it really meant something," she says. "It was a big deal. We were being taken out to very nice restaurants and cavorting with famous >

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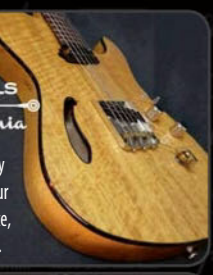

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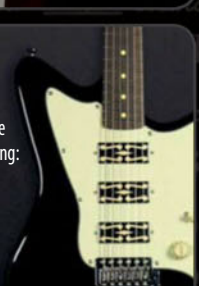

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people. I was a little naive; I thought, 'band forever'! There weren't a lot of female hard-rock bands like us back then; there was Vixen, Girlschool, and the Runaways were already defunct. You've got to have a big fucking hit to make millions of dollars, and we didn't have any of those. Cut to 1990, when grunge came around, there was no more glam rock and we were dropped. But was I thinking about going it alone? No, no, I was not."

Robin's contacts in the industry led to an audition for Lindsey Buckingham's touring band, which she played in for the next five years, and it wasn't until she went to an Ani DiFranco show that she realised going solo was an option.

"I heard about her early on, before she got huge," Robin explains. "She's a fucking great guitar player, and I thought, 'I've got to see this chick!'. She played a really small club in LA, and her manager was selling her CDs at the side of the stage. I'd never seen that before. We're talking 1995 or '96 – nobody was doing that, you had to go to a record store. I found out she was turning down record deals. I thought, 'Is she fucking insane?' But she's keeping the money. She was skipping the middleman, and a lot of us were inspired by her. When I was done with Lindsey, I thought, 'I'm going to go out there and be a badass like Ani DiFranco'."

Little Sister Records was born, and true to her word, Robin spent the next decade juggling US and European tours with teaching and session work. Social media was non-existent, and any time not playing or rehearsing was spent handing out flyers and phoning clubs to book gigs. She self-released two EPs, 2004's *After The Flood* and 2007's *Days Of Summer*, before realising that she'd built up her fanbase to a level where she could ask for donations and expect a response.

> "You need to have a circuit of fans, because you'll have a much easier time crowdfunding"

That, in her opinion, is something not enough modern bands do before they turn to crowdfunding.

"You need to have a circuit of fans, because you'll have a much easier time crowdfunding," she says. "You can't just come right out of the box. Build up your fanbase and your songs, get a buzz. You may think you're ready, but maybe you're not. You should do something cheaper, that you or your friends can afford to do at home first, to see where you're at with your songs and your recordings. Keep building and touring, and then try and ask for that $20,000."

Robin didn't find the campaign for *Take Me As I Am* quite so easy, but raised enough to complete the record. "I didn't make the goal," she admits. "I was trying for $20,000 again, but I made about $15,000. I'm up against it now because everyone and their cousin is crowdfunding. When I did it in 2009, nobody knew what Kickstarter was."

Robin is fully aware that music fans are close to suffering crowdfunding >

fatigue, thanks to a seemingly never-ending pool of artists setting up campaigns. It's no longer the preserve of struggling unsigned artists and opportunists; Devin Townsend, Megadeth and De La Soul have all turned to crowdfunding within the last two years.

"People think if you've got a record deal you've made it, but it wasn't true back then, and it definitely isn't true now," says Robin. "Record deals are like bank loans; they give you money, but you owe them back. So if you have a million-dollar deal and you sell a million records, you won't get any of the sales. Big deals like that don't even exist anymore." Despite the decline of the traditional record industry, Robin says she wouldn't be opposed to taking another deal, providing she could retain creative control. "It would have to be right," she says. "Crowdfunding will wear itself out soon. I can't keep asking my fans for money; I have to think outside the box. I do a lot of house concerts, and I make good money from that."

For now, Robin is concentrating on promoting *Take Me As I Am*, and has been touring Europe throughout summer with a carefully curated stable of equipment. "I use my Fender '52 reissue Tele, and my Taylor DCSM. I also love my Les Paul Standard and my '57 reissue Strat," she says. "When I'm playing a solo show, I only play acoustic, but if I'm with a full band, I switch between electric and acoustic. For pedals, I keep it simple; tuner, Dunlop boost, wah and [MXR] Carbon Copy. I've also got small, medium and large pedalboards I make myself and hand-wire."

> "People think if you've got a record deal you've made it, but it wasn't true then and it definitely isn't now"

While some bands become big in Japan, Janet is big in the Czech Republic, and has achieved the mainstream coverage there that's eluded her in the US and UK. Sexism in rock is, she says, partly to blame. "I've been on the cover of [Czech magazine] *Muzikus*, which is on par with *Rolling Stone* there," she says. "Granted, I'm a big fish in a small pond there, but I know the editor of one of the big guitar mags over here and he tells me flat out that [women] don't sell magazines. If it's Bonnie Raitt, maybe. Or Joan Jett, but with her it's about the image, the hot rocker chick. But

ACOUSTIC TECHNIQUES

Robin started learning guitar on an electric, but has adapted some of the techniques she was taught by Randy Rhoads for the acoustic. We asked her to explain how playing styles typically associated with electric guitar can bulk out the acoustic sound

Pinching

"When you play a solo on electric, pinching gives a harmonic sound, but on acoustic it sounds really percussive and bluesy. You have to play a lot harder on acoustic, too – it'll really build up your hand!"

Hammering

"You have to make your acoustic playing more interesting if you're just going to be one person on the stage. Adding in this technique gives you a one-woman band kind of sound. If you use a loop pedal too, it adds another percussive layer."

Soloing

"If you can play it on the electric, you can play it on acoustic – but you might be surprised at the sound you get. When you're playing an electric riff on an acoustic, add in some traditional picking for a fuller sound."

they'll put a lesser-known male on the cover." It's easy to wonder if Janet's career would have attracted more attention had she been male; she's arguably achieved as much as her former teacher Rhoads did in his short life, but her name is far less well known.

"I realised in my late 30s that I'm never going to be Sheryl Crow," she laughs. Has she ever wished for worldwide fame? "You do, you always do. There were points when I didn't know if I could keep doing this. But I'm a working musician and it pays my bills."

Janet Robin may not be a celebrity, but there's much that all artists could learn from her. Her business acumen and work ethic are admirable, and she's a musician through and through. "I know I have respect from the guitar community," she says. "That's what I wanted."

***Take Me As I Am* is released in the UK on 20 September. For more information, visit janetrobin.com**

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DIY WORKSHOP

TONES OF TWEED

Like a fine wine, tweed amps often improve, aesthetically at least, with age. **HUW PRICE** takes a '59 Fender Bassman housed in a reproduction cabinet and finds out if he can give it some much-needed vintage vibe...

1 Although the tweed had some sort of coating, compared to the real thing it looked pale and creamy

2 Six colour swatches made with various lacquer and dyes sitting on a '59 5E3 cabinet. Make sure you label the offcuts on the rear side so you don't lose track of which is which

3 Tweed varies a lot. The Bassman is behind a '51 Deluxe with original low-contrast tweed and a '59 Deluxe. The goal was to make the Bassman look more like the '59 Deluxe

4 The bottom of this 5E3 is much darker than the sides. Also note that the centre of the side panel is darker than the edges

Despite the now long-standing popularity of artificially aged guitars, the subject of making amps look old is comparatively unexplored. It's perhaps understandable because a beaten-up vintage Vox or Marshall just looks sort of... beaten up. Yet much like a well-loved pair of jeans, tweed amps can reach their aesthetic peak just before they finally fall apart.

Old tweed amps can develop a wonderful patina as the tweed darkens and takes on various amber and tan shades. Some amp manufacturers and cabinet manufacturers get pretty close to those vintage shades using shellac, tinted varnishes and other bespoke concoctions, and the results can be very attractive. However, the amps generally look too orange, shiny and new.

A client of mine recently bought a 1959 Fender Bassman at a surprisingly affordable price. The only snag was that the mostly original chassis, transformers and components were housed in a reproduction cabinet covered in pale yellow tweed. That's why this highly desirable classic cost only about as much as a modern boutique amp. Unfortunately, it was a case of 'right sound, wrong look', so he asked me if I would try to distress the cabinet 1.

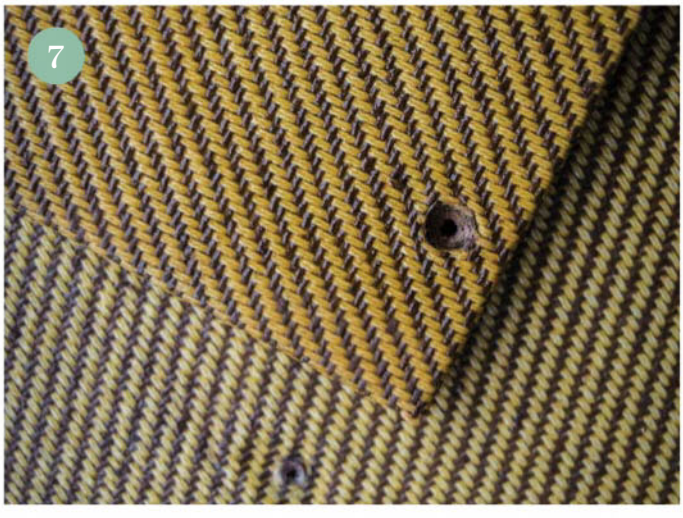
Figuring it out

Unlike recreating a classic Fender or Gibson guitar finish, you can't simply order up a few aerosols labeled 'knackered tweed'. So, the first task was to decide on the best methods for replicating the colour, texture and look of the real thing. I scrounged some tweed offcuts, cut them up into small squares and experimented 2.

I tried Colron wood stain, various Stewart-MacDonald stains, clear shellac, French polish, tinted lacquer and polyurethane varnish. Once the samples had dried off, I compared them with an original 5E3 that my friend Simon Howells had kindly let me borrow. The trouble is that the 5E3's tweed is several different shades – varying from a deep orangey amber to wheat yellow – so I would have to be able to vary the colour accordingly 3.

The plan was also to scuff up the tweed for a roadhouse look. I became concerned that this wouldn't be possible if the tweed was stained, because the stain might penetrate too far into the fabric. If you examine original tweed amps, the scuffs and scrapes often look relatively pale because they reveal the tweed's original colour. Experiments with files and sandpaper on the colour swatches confirmed my suspicions.

Through distressing more than a few guitars, I have learned that the best results are generally achieved by following the original factory procedures. I figured I should find out how Fender did things back



in the day. On one of the forums I investigated, a contributor had provided the necessary information based on a conversation he had with Sam Hutton, who apparently ran Fender's cabinet shop during the 1950s.

Fender began by treating the raw tweed with shellac, that penetrated the fibres and set hard. The tweed could then be sanded smooth without fraying and wiped with denatured alcohol to remove any loose particles. After a few coats of shellac, Fender then sprayed the cabinets with nitrocellulose lacquer and they were basically finished.

Close examination of the 5E3 supports this story. Unlike the raw tweed used on the Bassman cabinet and the colour swatch offcuts, 50s tweed feels very smooth, and it has a soft sheen. The colour is by no means uniform, and on Simon's amp it's possible to discern a faint 'burst' effect on the top and side panels 4.

Having sprayed so many guitar bodies, I have learned the hard way that you ignore the edges and corners at your peril. These days, I start every coat by spraying the rollovers around the edges, then I spray the sides and, finally, I spray the front and back.

The shaded 'burst' effect on original tweeds suggests that Fender's cabinet shop took a similar approach. Spraying the edges and corners first, then spaying the flat panels ensures the edges and corners get a double dose of lacquer. This discrepancy in the quantity of lacquer possibly explains the gradation in shade over time.

I decided I would apply clear shellac over the entire cabinet, follow that with light-tint lacquer to get the base colour tone, then shade the edges with tinted clear. After verifying the method on some offcuts, I felt pretty confident that the cabinet would end up looking the part.

Getting ready

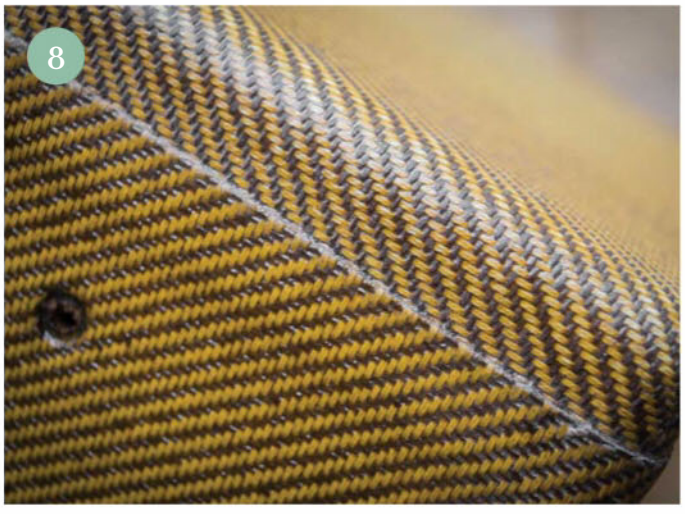
I removed the back panels, took off the handle and removed the chassis. The speakers were lifted off the baffle, then I removed the nameplate by pulling out the four corner pins. This exposed the hidden baffle bolt, so I could remove the speaker baffle to leave the empty cabinet. Lastly, I removed the staples holding the small patches of grille cloth to the lower back panel and bagged and labeled all the parts 5.

The exposed wood inside the repro cabinet was bare pine, but Fender stained the sides a reddish brown colour. Strangely, the bottom panels don't appear to have been stained. The late-50s speaker baffles were painted matt black, and although this one was painted, it looked like a thinly sprayed coating and the colour was more grey than black. I'd need to address the inside of the cabinet later, so before applying the shellac and lacquer, I carefully masked off all the exposed wood. >

5 When you take a cabinet to pieces, it's wise to bag and label all the parts

6 After two coats of 'transparent' shellac polish, the cabinet looks slightly mellower. Here it is drying off in the sunshine

7 Some tinted clear has been sprayed onto one of the back panels, and you can already see the contrast between the panel and the unsprayed cabinet



8 After several coats of tinted clear and light tint clear, the colour of the Bassman's cabinet looked very much like the 5E3's

9 I tried to replicate the faint 'burst' effect on the top and side panels by spraying the tinted coats more heavily around the edges

10 Here's the same panel after a going over with sandpaper and Scotch pad. It has already developed some pale scuff marks

11 The tool kit for this project is pretty basic. I completed the whole thing with a rasp, file, sandpaper and a Scotch pad. The rasp will need a wire brushing to clean the gunk off its teeth

First coats

It is always recommended to dilute tinted shellac 50/50 with denatured alcohol to achieve an even result and avoid excessive colour build-up along seams and exposed edges. However, I was using 'transparent' shellac polish, which has only a relatively slight tint, so I brushed it on neat. So long as you take care to brush out any runs or drips, the clear shellac goes on quickly and evenly, and the idea is to build up the depth of the sealer coats quickly.

After just one coat, the cabinet was already looking nicer, with less yellowness and a slightly darker hue. With the second coat added, the base tone of the tweed started to look a bit more like the 5E3's 6. Once the shellac had dried hard, I scuff sanded it with some quite coarse 120-grit paper and carefully removed any dust with a vigorous brushing and a vacuum cleaner.

Donning a safety mask, I began spraying the light tint clear coats. My method for achieving even coverage is to spray in straight lines going lengthways, followed by straight lines sideways. I follow this with straight lines on the diagonal and, once complete, I would call that one coat. After about three coats, the cabinet had darkened and mellowed, but it was some way off the deep amber of the 5E3 7.

In the shade

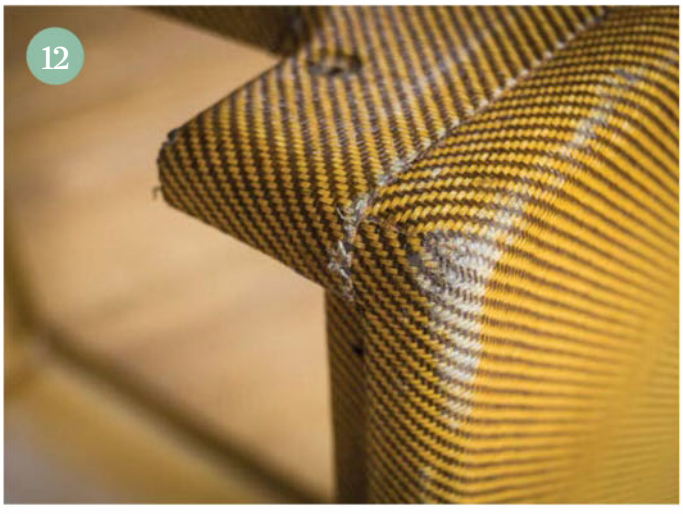
Swapping over to the tinted clear lacquer, I worked my way around all the edges and corners. The cabinet began to darken rapidly, so I allowed each coat to dry thoroughly and checked the results in various lights to gauge the progress. In a sense, I was using the tinted clear to 'shade' the cabinet, and by being careful with my spraying technique I managed to achieve the subtle 'burst' effect on the top and sides. It helps to position the aerosol in the centre and spray the tinted coats, aiming towards the outside edges.

The base panel of Simon's amp was significantly darker than the top and sides, so I sprayed the bottom of the Bassman cabinet with amber lacquer to try to match the more orange hue. I was fortunate to have a tin left over from a previous project, but you could probably achieve a similar result with several coats of the tinted lacquer.

With the spraying complete, the cabinet was looking the part and I was really pleased with the colour 8 & 9. Frankly, I could have stopped at this point, because it looked not unlike a collector-grade '59 Bassman, but the owner had sent various pictures of Bassmans he likes the look of, so I needed to think about how to achieve similar results.

Scuffing and scruffing

Compared to distressing a guitar body, ageing a tweed cabinet is a walk in the park. It's actually a quick, easy and enjoyable process. Having



sanded the shellac coats, the tweed felt a lot smoother, but the 5E3 was super-smooth to the touch. The surface also had a soft sheen rather than a glossy and reflective finish. So, I began by sanding the entire cabinet with 220-grit paper, followed by a rub down with a Scotch pad.

Once the dust had been removed, the cabinet's surface felt smooth to the touch and some high spots had rubbed through to reveal the pale raw tweed beneath 10. If you want a pristine look, you could fill in the rub-through areas with extra coats of light-tint lacquer, followed by a gentle rub with a Scotch pad, but if you're shooting for an aged look, the pale patches really look the part.

As with distressing guitar finishes, it always helps to have pictures of the real thing for reference so that you can target your efforts in the correct areas. Tweed amps tend to show wear along exposed edges of the tweed and the corners and edges of the cabinet. Worn spots also tend to fray and there will be dirty and stained patches.

After trying sandpaper and a file, I discovered the best tool for scuffing up tweed is a good old-fashioned wood rasp. I originally bought mine for neck-shaping purposes, but it scuffs off the lacquer to reveal raw tweed – or even bare wood – in a matter of seconds 11.

Referring to the pictures, I worked my way around the cabinet trying hard not to get too carried away. I really liked the contrast between the raw tweed and the tinted lacquer, and you can see how the colour sits on the tweed's surface rather than penetrating the fabric 12.

However, the tweed looked a bit bright, so I toned it down by rubbing ash from my barbecue and charcoal dust into the exposed areas. I also rubbed the charcoal dust all over the cabinet and it created dark patches in certain areas.

All in all, I probably spent no more than a couple of hours artificially ageing the tweed, and I was delighted with the outcome.

Inside job

There seemed to be no point in leaving the inside of the cabinet pristine when the outside looked 60 years old. The speaker baffle was easy – I just brushed it with some matt black oil-based paint and it looked a lot better 13. I took a photo of the inside panel of the 5E3 on my phone, carried it to my local hardware store and bought the stain that looked like the best match – Blackfriars Chestnut.

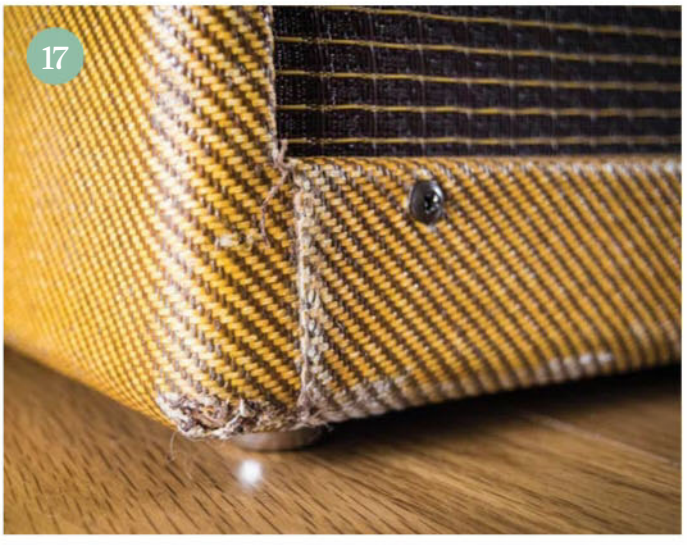
After removing all the masking, I painted the stain onto the side panels. I took care not to stain the tweed, but I wasn't too bothered with pristine edges because Fender wasn't either. Once the stain had dried, I turned my attention to the base panel, which needed to look a lot greyer, darker and dirtier.

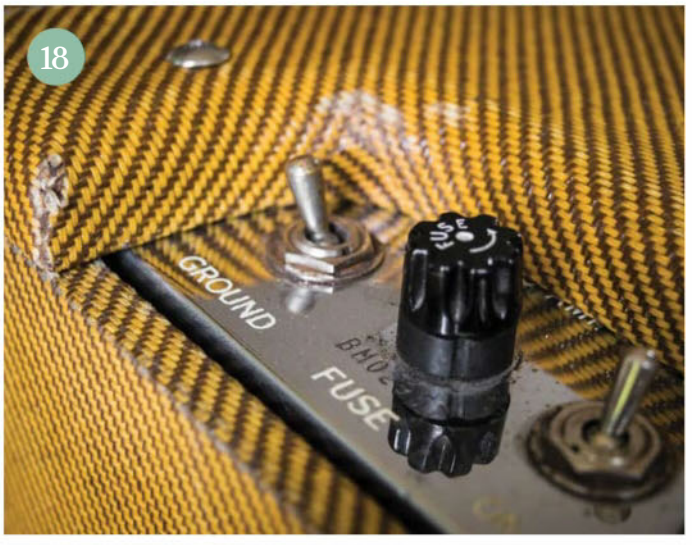
For starters, the wood needed to oxidise, so rather than use >

12 Since the finish sits on the surface, it's easy to scuff through to the paler tweed beneath. The exposed areas looked a bit too pale at this point, so I darkened them with ash and charcoal dust

13 Brushing the baffle with some matt black oil paint created a more authentic look

14 The side panels were stained and the bottom panel was oxidised with potassium permanganate before both got the ash and charcoal treatment. The repro label came from a seller on eBay





15 - 18 The finished amp in all its frayed glory. We're really happy with the results

the vinegar, wire wool and tea method, I dissolved some potassium permanganate crystals in a jar of water and brushed the solution onto the bare pine. If you want a surefire method of oxidising wood, this is it. You can buy packets of potassium permanganate crystals online very cheaply and you really don't need very much. I used a level teaspoon for this.

The pine darkened as the oxidisation agent dried off, but I wanted a dusty and dirty look. Again, I used ash and charcoal dust, employing a stiff bristled brush to work it into the grain. Having already applied a tube chart label to the side panel, I treated the side panels to the same mixture and brushed away the excess 14.

Back in the box

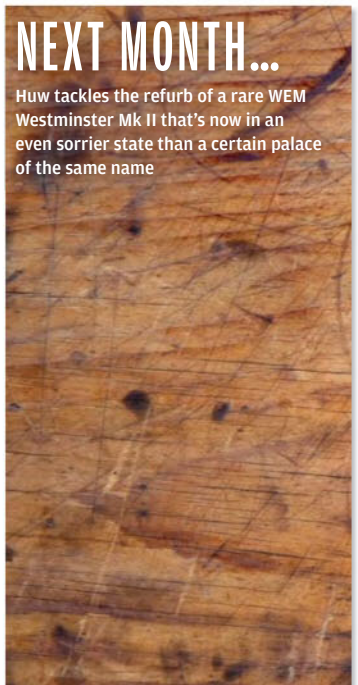
Having bagged up everything carefully, reassembly was easy. I started by reinstalling the baffle and mounting the speakers. The amp chassis went in next and the back panels were reattached. The amp had arrived with its original handle, but the owner decided to retire it because it's in a delicate state and he plans to gig the amp. Although I couldn't swear on it, I believe the panel and handle screws were genuinely old.

I deliberately held off refitting the nameplate until last, because it's the best bit. When it arrived, the cabinet was wearing a repro nameplate, but the original was included in the sale, along with all four original pins. The old nameplate's condition provided a clue about the fate of the original cabinet.

Somebody had painted black paint over the brown, so it's most likely that the original cabinet had been painted black in an attempt to update the looks – as was common during the blackface era. After discussions with the owner, it was decided to use the original nameplate. We decided it was part of the amp's history, and it looked way cooler, too. In fact, we think the whole amp looks a lot better. Hopefully, you feel the same.

NEXT MONTH...

Huw tackles the refurb of a rare WEM Westminster Mk II that's now in an even sorrier state than a certain palace of the same name



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Past Masters, Remastered

After a hiatus of about 70 years, Epiphone is back in the quality acoustic-archtop business. They may look like relics of the Jazz Age, but these Masterbilt Century models combine deference to the past with modern convenience – as **HUW PRICE** discovers

Although we may associate the Epiphone brand with Gibson's budget electrics and acoustics, Epiphone was once one of the great names of American guitar making. Many of the Epiphones produced from the late 50s onwards are fantastic instruments in their own right, but the new Masterbilt Century archtops represent an attempt to alter perceptions by revisiting Epiphone's pre-war golden era.

A considerable effort has gone into getting it right, and the evidence is in the details. The tailpieces have an aged but not distressed look, the fingerboard edges are softly rolled for player comfort, vintage-style fretwire is used and period decorative motifs have been revived.

The finishes have a soft sheen rather than high-gloss and they appear to have been applied thinly. Check the specs and you'll find that body dimensions, longitudinal bracing and materials are all accurate, too – including solid spruce tops. Perhaps most impressive of all are the repro tuners. Epiphone has gone all out for a vintage look, with 'E' branding and period-correct buttons, but under the covers the gears are tweaked for a more modern 18:1 ratio. >

EPIPHONE
OLYMPIC
MASTERBILT
EPIPHONE
ZENITH
MASTERBILT

Epiphone Masterbilt Century Olympic, Zenith & De Luxe Classic

Fortunately, adherence to the past combines with an up-to-date Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup and an eSonic HD preamp and stealthily concealed volume and tone controls. A combination jack socket/battery compartment is tucked under the tailpiece hinge.

Masterbilt Olympic

You could describe the Olympic as the most basic model, but we don't mean that in a derogatory sense, because that's the way Epiphone made Olympics back in the 30s. Body binding is single-ply; there's no fretboard binding and the markers are simple pearloid dots. Construction is simpler, too, with a mahogany neck, stacked heel and a scarf-jointed headstock.

In use

We're off to a good start, because the Olympic is a box of sheer fun. The experience of playing an out-and-out archtop acoustic with a solid soundboard is entirely different from a regular flat top. Its tone is very midrange-focused, punchy and percussive, and it possesses a slightly boxy clanginess that makes me want to keep playing. It also does an amazing thing whereby clear harmonic overtones bloom across open chords.

In rhythm mode, it's a surprisingly dynamic and solid performer. You can tell that these guitars were designed to pummel their way through an ensemble, and jazz chord inversions sound clear, harmonically coherent and forceful. Before long, I found myself strumming near the neck while comping chords, then shifting my strumming hand closer to the bridge for added dynamic thrust, volume and treble cut.

Moving from jazz voicings to country chords, the Olympic reveals itself to be a consummate rootsy country rhythm guitar. You can pick out basslines and add high inversions as you strum open chords, and everything sounds balanced and clear.

Switch to soloing mode and it's immediately apparent why a 1935 Olympic became David Rawlings' main guitar. Compared to a flat top, the Olympic produces notes with considerably more body, woody sustain and clarity. The tone has such a pretty, keening and evocative character, it's sure to inspire.

It's also wonderfully even across the strings and all along the

The Olympic is a box of sheer fun. Its tone is very midrange-focused, punchy and percussive

The period-correct tuner casings contain modern-spec 18:1 gear ratios that tune easily and hold tight

The Olympic and De Luxe models have their volume and tone controls concealed under the treble-side f-hole

fretboard. So wherever your fingers find themselves, no notes jump out or become subsumed by wolf-y tones, and you can slip effortlessly between solo notes, strummed chords and arpeggios.

Masterbilt Zenith

The Zenith is the next one up – in size and price – and its most obvious distinguishing feature is the round and bound soundhole. Nevertheless, this is a bona-fide archtop. Where the Olympic and De Luxe have their controls tucked inside the treble-side f-holes, the Zenith's sit under the bass side of the soundhole.

The neck is a proper jazz-style affair made from three pieces of mahogany and two pieces of maple sandwiched together. The bound ebony fingerboard features 'falling snowflake' pearloid markers and the laminated flame-maple body has three-ply binding front and back.

In use

With a round hole, the playing experience will be far more familiar to flat-top owners because the player gets to hear far more of the guitar's tone. With a conventional f-hole, conversely, a lot of the tone gets projected forwards towards the listener and away from the player.

The Zenith's sound is somewhat more familiar, too, with far less midrange emphasis, a more open treble and deeper bass. It seems a fair bit louder, but its sonic character is far less quirky and pronounced.

Where the Olympic's pumped mids and rolled-off treble and bass allow it to occupy a frequency space that's so often vacated by vintage-voiced flat tops, the Zenith seems to encourage you to use a more rhythmic approach, with more right-arm intensity.

It's also fun to play lead lines, but notes don't have quite the same degree of sustain or meaty solidity. On the plus side, there's a little more action in the upper harmonics, which lends a more ethereal shimmer to chord work and soloing alike.

The Zenith's controls are under the bass side of the soundhole

Masterbilt De Luxe Classic

All three of these Epiphone Masterbilt Century models are supplied with a pickguard to be fitted at the owner's discretion, but this was the only one that arrived with its pickguard already attached.

True to the exacting standards of the Masterbilt series, it has the right shape and look, with five-ply binding and a mitre joint in the one corner beneath the 15th fret.

Measuring 17 inches across, the body is one inch wider than >

Despite its round soundhole, the Zenith is a proper archtop with longitudinal bracing

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Olympic

The **Loar LH-700-VS £736** has a solid spruce top, maple back and sides and comes with open gear Grover tuners and a case. You'll have to fit a pickup yourself though. With an all-laminated wild cherry body, the **Godin 5th Avenue Cognac Burst £498** has a custom French polish finish but no pickup.

Zenith

The **D'Angelico EX-63 £1,249** is a round-hole archtop with a piezo pickup, Grover die-cast tuners and all the traditional bling. It's available in natural and sunburst and comes with a case.

De Luxe Classic

The **D'Angelico DAEXL-1A £1,150** is a 17-inch wide archtop that really looks the part and comes with a piezo pickup and a slim neck profile, but the top is laminated rather than solid. Supplied with a floating single-coil pickup, the **Gretsch G9555 New Yorker £611** has a solid spruce top with laminated maple back and sides.

the Zenith's and 2.5 inches wider than the Olympic's. This time, the ebony fingerboard is treated to large 'notched snowflake' markers, but the 'ebonoid' floating bridge is just the same.

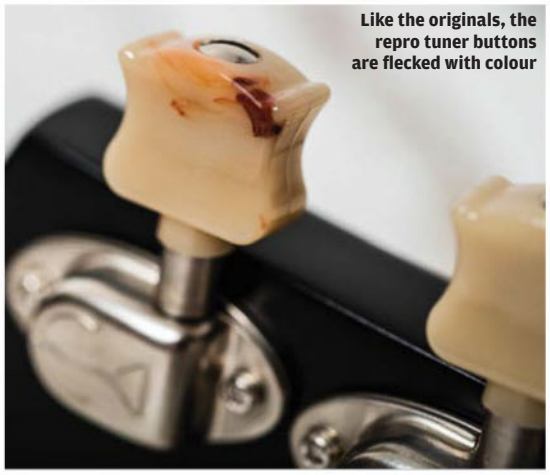
In use

With an armful of Masterbilt De Luxe, it would be quite easy to imagine oneself wearing a cheap tuxedo in an orchestra pit, swathed in tobacco smoke with a silent movie playing overhead. It's by far the biggest of this bunch in size and sound, but it combines elements of both the Olympic and Zenith. The De Luxe is the loudest by some margin, but it has the highs and lows of the Zenith combined with the even balance, midrange muscle and sustain of the Olympic. It also has the most refined and sophisticated tone. No doubt you can bash out a rhythm part with considerable cut and gusto, but it responds just as readily to a soft touch that rounds out the bass and allows the extended treble to breathe.

The De Luxe doesn't quite have the Olympic's remarkable evenness but it comes close, and there's a dusting of high harmonics that linger on as single

The De Luxe is the biggest of the bunch and the loudest by some margin. It also has the most sophisticated tone

The De Luxe's pickguard features five-ply binding and really looks the part



Like the originals, the repro tuner buttons are flecked with colour

The flamey figuring on the De Luxe's maple back and sides is vivid and vibey

notes fade leisurely away. It may not have quite the open-throated shout of the Zenith or the Olympic's accentuated sonic character but, simply put, the De Luxe is the best all-rounder.

All three of these guitars are fitted with the same eSonic HD preamp and Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup. The pickup system was designed with dedicated acoustic amplification in mind, which typically comes with the kind of powerful onboard parametric EQ that will allow you to sculpt not only the kind of toneful warmth synonymous with the Jazz Age but also much more contemporary acoustic sounds ideal for the modern player.

Output level is high and noise is low, but be mindful that the voicing is relatively bright when plugged directly into a flat-response desk or PA system, so you may want to use the instrument's onboard tone control to roll off the high end if you don't have an acoustic amp or preamp on hand. David Rawlings stopped using pickups live many years ago and has since relied exclusively upon microphones but if that's not an option, we're happy to report that although the mids are less full, the bass response retains much of its woody character.

Epiphone has pulled off something spectacular by creating three distinct models that combine modern Far Eastern production with an authentically vintage vibe. The tuners are a triumph, and kudos to Epiphone for going the extra mile. Let's hope one or two other heritage brands will finally be inspired to do likewise.

The gauge of fretwire is judged perfectly and Epiphone has achieved that elusive goal of carving a fat vintage neck profile that isn't unwieldy or clubby. In fact, it's a sheer delight.

You shouldn't make snap judgements if you get to try one of these. Even more than a solid wood flat top, these archtops require a few minutes of playing time before they warm up properly. Perhaps the bridge bases could be made to fit the top a little more snugly, but ultimately, I don't think I have ever had so much fun playing archtop acoustics. So which one would I choose? That's a tough call, but when they are eventually returned to Epiphone I think there will be an Olympic-sized hole in my collection.

KEY FEATURES

Olympic

- **PRICE** £499
- **DESCRIPTION** Archtop acoustic 6-string guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** solid spruce top with f-holes and longitudinal bracing, laminated mahogany back and sides, set mahogany rounded C neck, bone nut, rosewood fingerboard with dot markers and 20 vintage-style frets
- **HARDWARE** Aged nickel trapeze tailpiece, floating ebonoid bridge, Historic Epiphone reissue tuners with Marboloid 'Crown' buttons & 18:1 ratio
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup with eSonic HD preamp, volume and tone controls
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 23mm at first fret, 27mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.2kg/4.8lb
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (just spin the bridge around)
- **FINISHES** Aged Gloss Honeyburst and Violin Burst
- **CONTACT** Gibson Europe **www.epiphone.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Immensely characterful tone
+ Amazing sustain and harmonic bloom
+ Very evenly balanced
+ Articulate mid-focused sound
+ Stable tuning

– Rolled-off highs and lows

A wonderful instrument for soloing and chord work that nails the David Rawlings tone for a much lower price than an original

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Zenith

- **PRICE** £599
- **DESCRIPTION** Archtop acoustic 6-string guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** solid spruce top with round soundhole and longitudinal bracing, laminated flame-maple back and sides, set five piece mahogany/maple rounded C neck, bone nut, ebony fingerboard with falling snowflake markers and 20 vintage-style frets
- **HARDWARE** Aged nickel trapeze tailpiece, floating ebonoid bridge, Historic Epiphone reissue tuners with Marboloid 'Crown' buttons & 18:1 ratio
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup with eSonic HD preamp, volume and tone controls
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 23mm at first fret, 27mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.3kg/5lb
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (just spin the bridge around)
- **FINISHES** Aged Gloss Vintage Natural and Vintage Sunburst
- **OPTIONS** The Zenith Classic features f-holes rather than a round soundhole

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Loud, bright and slightly aggressive tone
+ Less 'jazzy', more country/blues
+ Impressive neck construction
+ Higher trim level

– Shorter sustain

A very interesting guitar that falls somewhere between a flat top and an archtop, sonically. Could be good for solo artists who are looking for a different look and sound

8/10

KEY FEATURES

De Luxe Classic

- **PRICE** £729
- **DESCRIPTION** Archtop acoustic 6-string guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** solid spruce top with f-holes and longitudinal bracing, laminated flame-maple back and sides, set five-piece mahogany/maple rounded C neck, bone nut, ebony fingerboard with notched diamond markers and 20 vintage-style frets
- **HARDWARE** Aged nickel trapeze tailpiece, floating ebonoid bridge, Historic Epiphone reissue tuners with Marboloid 'Crown' buttons & 18:1 ratio
- **ELECTRICS** Shadow NanoFlex HD under-saddle pickup with eSonic HD preamp, volume and tone controls
- **SCALE LENGTH** 648mm/25.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 23mm at first fret, 27mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.3kg/5lb
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (just spin the bridge around)
- **FINISHES** Aged Gloss Vintage Natural and Vintage Sunburst
- **OPTIONS** The Deluxe features a round soundhole rather than f-holes

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Full frequency-range tones
+ Most dynamic of the bunch
+ Powerful rhythm sounds
+ Great sustain and cut for soloing
+ Complex upper harmonics and deep bass

– Americana die-hards may want to mic up for maximum authenticity

The best all-rounder in the series, the De Luxe is ideal for jazz, country, rockabilly, western swing and more

9/10

BILT WITH LOVE

G&B recently headed out to Epiphone's Nashville HQ to meet Scott Harrison, the company's R&D Luthier and a key player behind the new Masterbilt Century archtops

Story **Huw Price** | Photography **Joe Supple**

Q Could you explain the key concepts behind Epiphone's Masterbilt series of archtops?
"Inspired by our collection of original pre-1957 archtops, we wanted to get back to the true acoustic roots of the instrument. But we recognised that today's modern player still wanted to be able to plug in. So, we added an acoustic/electric preamp and pickup system voiced to amplify the natural acoustic tone, creating the first collection of archtop 'acoustic/electric' guitars that are designed to be played and amplified as true acoustic instruments."

Q How did you go about recreating these iconic designs?
"Our design and marketing team reviewed Epiphone's vintage archtop models and chose some of the most important, distinctive and desirable features and appointments that we felt needed to be included in the new Masterbilt Century line, to properly capture the historic vintage vibe. While these are not reissues, there are a number of features and appointments that have been painstakingly reproduced from the originals, while keeping a modern level of playability and sensibility."

Q Are the solid spruce tops carved or pressed?
"While many of our vintage pre-1957 Epiphones have carved solid tops, some have pressed solid tops. The tops on the Masterbilt Century line feature a pressed solid-spruce top with traditional longitudinal bracing."

Q The repro tuners look and feel fantastic...
"We have wanted to reproduce these tuning machines for some time now, so when the Masterbilt Century project came up, there was never any question as to what tuning machines we were going to use. Richard Akers, who heads our R&D team, did a great job of capturing the nuances of the original vintage tuners while incorporating modern tolerances and performance, such as an 18:1 ratio."

Q In which country are the Olympic, Zenith and Deluxe being made?
"These are being made at our factory in Indonesia. It's the same factory that is currently making our top-of-the-line flat-top Masterbilt acoustic guitars."

Q Has the neck joint been altered from the original designs?
"The tapered dovetail neck joints are fairly consistent with those of the period originals. We did away with the 'floating' fingerboard support, as modern machining capabilities make it an unnecessary step."

Q Can customers fit pickguards themselves?
"It's not difficult to install the pickguards if you have some very basic woodworking

Epiphone's Nashville HQ contains an amazing collection of vintage models, many of which inspired the new range

skills. But if you are particularly timid in this area, a little professional assistance might not be a bad idea."

Q What type of finish is being applied to the guitars in the range?

"The finish is polyurethane, which is applied using an electro-static painting system. This allows us to have a very thin finish, which does not restrict the instrument's vibration. It's a semi-gloss finish we call 'aged gloss', as it closely replicates the vintage look of 75-year-old guitars!"

Q Your bridge bases contact the top all along their length, rather than resting on 'feet' at each end...

"Yes, we opted for the full-contact bridge base on the Masterbilt Century line for two main reasons: it is more in keeping with the period originals, and it helps disguise and protect the undersaddle pickup element."

Taylor 322ce 12-Fret & 510e

Taylors with slotted headstocks and open-gear tuners? Whatever next? **HUW PRICE** assesses a contrasting pair...

Things have definitely been changing at Taylor guitars. Just a few years ago, the idea of a production-model Taylor with a slotted headstock would have seemed implausible. And yet here we are with two slot-headed Taylors, and they look the part. In fact, they look rather good.

Both have Taylor's Expression System 2 fitted and some wonderful open-gear tuners with ivoroid buttons. The nuts are Tusq and the saddles Micarta, and both have ebony boards and bridges. The similarities end there.

322ce 12-Fret

You're looking at a satin-finished all-solid body with a mahogany top, Tasmanian blackwood back and sides and a mahogany neck. We can see why a cutaway makes sense with a 12th-fret neck join, but it can go against the grain – so to speak. It does work here, though, because the body shape and the proportions are harmonious.

In use

This is a guitar that confounds expectations. We certainly hadn't anticipated such a deep and vibrant bass response from the relatively small body – especially with the loss of real estate from the cutaway. Even so, the bass sounds full, solid and punchy with just a hint of boom. With a thumb pick, the low end has considerable power, which makes it easy to set up and maintain rhythmic drive with alternating thumb patterns.

The downside is that the bass end can overpower the treble. It's not noticeable when you're palm muting, but when the low strings are allowed to ring open it can be a struggle to hear the higher notes of chord voicings, unless your nails are long.

Things are considerably more balanced without a thumb pick, even if you dig in with your thumbnail, but the plain strings don't quite ring true >

Both guitars sport classy open-gear tuners with ivoroid buttons

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Taylor 322ce 12-Fret

Martin's **000-15SM** **£1,634** has a slotted headstock and 12 frets to the solid-mahogany body, but no pickup system or cutaway. The all-mahogany **Martin OMC-15ME** **£1,599** has a cutaway and a 14th-fret join and Matrix VT Enhance pickups. The **Faith Neptune Mahogany Gloss** **£719** is a more contemporary option with a cutaway and a Shadow Performer tuner preamp/ Nanoflex II pickup.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Taylor 510e

The **Gibson J-45 Southern Jumbo Ltd** **£2,152** is a slope-shouldered spruce/ mahogany dreadnought with a similar scale length and an LR Baggs Element Active VTC pickup system. For a longer scale length, check out the **Larrivee D-40E** **£1,470** with spruce/mahogany body and a Shadow NFX VT pickup system

The 510e is our first encounter with Lutz spruce, and we like it

and despite being new, the B string on the review guitar has a slightly muted quality that we suspect might be a minor saddle issue.

Despite the parlor guitar features, the 322ce sounds nothing like a parlor guitar. There's no boxy midrange honk or lack of depth. Instead, it has the fullness of a bigger-bodied guitar, but in a smaller package.

When the 322ce is strummed, everything gels together nicely. It's almost as if fingerpicking alone cannot get sufficient energy into the plain strings to drive the top, but a plectrum certainly can. It coaxes out hitherto-unheard treble sheen that floats over the bass and mids.

There's a touch of natural compression that only enhances the 322ce's abilities as a rhythm guitar par excellence. Everything points to this being a fantastic fingerpicker, but while it's enjoyable in a quiet and mellow sort of way, that's not what it does best. A strummer's delight.

510e

Lutz spruce is a new one for us – a naturally occurring sitka and white spruce hybrid. The tropical mahogany back and sides are more familiar and a flawless gloss finish enhances all this gorgeous tone timber. The mahogany neck is described as having a V profile, but it's so subtle we were oblivious until reading the specs. It feels even better than usual, and the shorter 24 7/8-inch scale length further enhances the playability.

In use

The term 'smiley face' could be used to describe both this guitar's frequency response and the effect it has on you. There's loads of treble, combined with a powerful and deep bass. This is the default 'curve' for many dreadnoughts, but while the midrange is recessed, the bass and treble here are evenly matched.

The low-frequency response is particularly impressive because Taylor has managed to make it so strong without introducing any of the boominess that so often accompanies bassy dreadnoughts. The 510e possesses very crisp definition, a solid thump and rich harmonic overtones.

This time, the plain strings aren't overpowered, so all the voicings and suspensions you might add on the B and E strings cut straight through. Single-note runs across the strings highlight the slightly lower energy of the D and G strings, but the 510e is balanced enough and, although bright, the plain strings sound full and strong.

This guitar is a bluegrass natural, and any basslines you pick out balance superbly with strummed chords. It's also tremendous fun for banging out rockabilly rhythms and R&B grooves on the E and A strings.

Also impressive is the 510e's lightning-fast response and free-moving top. You can tap the bridge with your finger and feel a really strong kick-back. This means that very little energy is required to get this soundboard moving, making it a remarkably adept fingerpicker.

Because both guitars have the same Expression 2 pickup system, this review provides an excellent opportunity to gauge its ability to capture the acoustic nuances of a particular instrument. After all, these guitars sound different acoustically, so it follows they should sound different when amplified.

And indeed they do – to an extent. With the tone controls in the null positions, the Expression 2 system is a little full in the bass and shy in the treble, but it's a fine starting point. Very little adjustment is needed to balance things out, and many of the acoustic qualities come through.

The system is very lively and has some of the characteristics of a microphone – albeit a slightly coloured one. The sensitivity is such that it brings back memories of taping a microphone to the top of my acoustic guitars before I got my first electric.

The Expression system doesn't sound like an undersaddle piezo at all – largely because it isn't. It does sound more acoustic than electric, but a decent preamp with parametric equalisation might help to compensate for some slight frequency anomalies. The output level is very strong, but background hum can be intrusive in quieter moments.

The 322ce has the darker and woodier tone, but it's more of a niche product. Like many factory-fresh spruce guitars, the 510e sounds a bit callow and youthful, but we have no doubt that its voice will quickly break into something mellower and richer. Of the two, the 510e is the best all-rounder by some distance.

KEY FEATURES

Taylor 322ce 12-Fret

- **PRICE** £2,031
- **DESCRIPTION** All-solid electro-acoustic six-string guitar, made in the USA
- **BUILD** Mahogany top with Tasmanian blackwood back and sides, mahogany neck, ebony bridge and fingerboard, rosewood peghead overlay, 12th-fret neck join, open-gear tuners with ivoroid buttons, Tusq nut and Micarta saddle, white/black plastic bindings, ebony bridge pins with diamond markers
- **ELECTRICS** Taylor Expression 2 system
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No extra charge
- **FINISH** Satin body and neck
- **SCALE LENGTH** 631.52mm/24 7/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 44mm at nut, 56mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 22mm at seventh fret
- **STRING SPACING** 37mm at nut, 55.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 1.8kg/3.9lb
- **CONTACT** Big Fish Studios 01206 382224 **www.taylorguitars.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Impressive bass response
+ Slim, easy-playing neck
+ A great, compact rhythm strummer

– Surprisingly hard work for fingerstyle
– Plain strings a tad weak
– Expression 2 system not noise-free

An interesting-sounding guitar with great looks and easy playability, but its distinctive voicing may not suit all players and applications

8/10

KEY FEATURES

Taylor 510e

- **PRICE** £2,401
- **DESCRIPTION** All-solid electro-acoustic six-string guitar, made in the USA
- **BUILD** Lutz spruce top with mahogany back and sides, mahogany neck, ebony bridge and fingerboard, ebony peghead overlay, 12th-fret neck join, open-gear tuners with ivoroid buttons, Tusq nut and Micarta saddle, tortoise/cream/black plastic bindings, ebony bridge pins with diamond markers, tortoise/ivoroid rosette
- **ELECTRICS** Taylor Expression 2 system
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No extra charge
- **FINISH** Gloss body with satin neck
- **SCALE LENGTH** 631.52 mm/24 7/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 44mm at nut, 54mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 21.5mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 38mm at nut, 55mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 1.93kg/4.2lb

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Strong but boom-free bass
+ Appealing short-scale, soft V neck
+ Impressive all-round abilities
+ Very dynamic response

– Rather scooped through the mids
– Some hum from Expression 2 system

Loud, lively, powerful and very crisp definition with no boom. A dreadnought with classic attributes and a modern tone that picks just as well as it strums

9/10

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Blackstar ID:Core Stereo 100 & Stereo 150

Compact, lightweight, loud and affordable – what's not to like? **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** goes on an adventure in Super Wide Stereo...

Over the last couple of years, Blackstar's ID:Core amps have helped redefine expectations of what a home/practice amp can deliver. Imagine that the Northampton company took all of that clever functionality and proprietary tech – six voices, Super Wide Stereo sound, an array of digital effects, deep editing and patch storage via its Insider software, USB recording and reamping – and made it available in loud, giggable boxes that you can lift with two fingers?

That's exactly what happened. First teased at Winter NAMM 2016 in January, then announced officially at Musikmesse in April, Blackstar's ID:Core Stereo 100 and 150 not only offer all of the above, but the company has also introduced an onboard looper (accessible via the bundled two-button footswitch) with unlimited overdubs, undo and clear functions, a polyphonic octave effect and a stereo effects loop. All for very tempting prices indeed.

The six ID:Core voices – clean warm, clean bright, crunch, super crunch, OD1 and OD2 – have been enhanced to suit the larger-format models, which comprise the Stereo 100 (2x 50 watts) and Stereo 150 (2x 75 watts). Both amplifiers come loaded with a pair of 10-inch speakers, but the 150's cabinet is bigger in every direction. That said, 624(w)x486(h)x259mm(d) is still pretty compact, and its 14kg weight is a breeze to load in and out of venues and rehearsal rooms, compared to a valve combo of similar dimensions.

Apart from the differences in physical size and power output, both the 100 and 150 are almost identical. In addition to a global master volume, you also get gain and volume controls, with the volume control simulating power-amp overdrive and compression in its higher reaches. A three-band EQ is joined by Blackstar's ISF control for further sculpting of your chosen voice setting.

The 12 onboard stereo effects are organised into three banks of four. Phaser, chorus/flanger, octaver and tremolo live in the modulation bank, then there's a bank of four delays (linear, analogue, tape and multi) and four reverbs (room, hall, spring, plate). Each segment of the effect type control represents one of the four available within the chosen bank, while the travel of the pot through the segment adjusts an individual parameter, as does the effects level control, although the latter equates mostly to the depth or mix. The tap tempo button can be used to set delay times and modulation speeds, while holding it down – almost like a shift key – in conjunction with the bass control allows you to adjust the low-end resonance and, paired with the treble control, presence. Consult the manual for yet more hidden functionality.

Once you are happy with your sound, you can save it to one of nine onboard patch locations split into three banks of three. Further tone storage, under-the-hood editing and all kinds of clever extras are unlocked by connecting your amp to a computer via its USB port and using the aforementioned Insider software, which is available as a free download for Mac OS X and Windows machines via blackstarinsider.co.uk.

Further tone storage, under-the-hood editing and clever extras are unlocked by connecting your amp to a computer-

In use

Being a self-confessed 1940s >

The voice control on both amps offers six distinct tones

KEY FEATURES

Blackstar ID:Core Stereo 100 & Stereo 150

- **PRICE** £229 (Stereo 100) & £299 (Stereo 150)
- **DESCRIPTION** Programmable solid-state combos with onboard digital effects. Made in China
- **POWER** 2x 50 watts (Stereo 100) & 2x 75 watts (Stereo 150)
- **CONTROLS** Voice, gain, volume, bass, middle, treble, ISF, effect type, effect level, tap, master volume. Manual mode button (hold to engage onboard tuner), bank and 3x channel select buttons
- **CONNECTIONS** Top panel: input, USB. Rear panel: speaker emulated/headphone out (level controlled by volume control, master volume controls internal speaker level only), MP3/line-in (mini-jack), footswitch (two-button FS-13 unit for looper and patch modes included, FS-12 5-way programmable foot-controller available separately), stereo effects loop send, 2x return
- **SPEAKERS** 2x 10-inch drivers
- **DIMENSIONS** Stereo 100: 573(w)x447(h)x241mm(d) Stereo 150: 624(w)x486(h) x259mm(d)
- **WEIGHT** Stereo 100: 12.5kg/27.5lbs Stereo 150: 14.5kg/31.9lbs
- **CONTACT** Blackstar 01604 817817 **blackstaramps.com**

There are 12 onboard effects and a tap tempo for setting delay times and modulation speeds

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Yamaha's **THR100HD** **£719** sees the Japanese company's 'third amp' idea all grown up and getting a taste of life on the gigging circuit. It sounds excellent but you'll need to shell out for an additional speaker cabinet. Due later this year, **Marshall**'s **CODE100** combo **£349** looks set to pack an awful lot of modelling power and effects into a gig-friendly box and the price is competitive too.

technology curmudgeon when it comes to amplifiers, the first thing this writer tends to do when confronted with a tech-loaded multi-tool such as this is put it into manual mode and attempt to dial in a sound that could get him through the average gig.

Happily, both ID:Core amps pass that test with flying colours: selecting the clean bright voice, setting the gain to three o'clock, rolling the bass back to 11 o'clock and the mids up to about half past two yields a satisfyingly organic, chimey Vox-type tone that bares its teeth nicely when you dig in. It sounds good with a Tele and an ES-335 and can cover 60s pop, modern indie and rootsy Americana, too. It also responds well to variations in picking-hand attack and tonal changes via the guitar's controls. Our experience of function-gig volume levels suggests the 100 is more than loud enough to cope – noise levels are low too, even with lively single coils – but if it you need more power then the 150 kicks out much more of everything, and it won't be found wanting in many real-world scenarios.

Turning to the effects section – reverb first for this dinosaur, naturally – we're wowed all over again by how three-dimensional Blackstar's Super Wide Stereo sound is and how much fun it brings to home playing. Throw the built-in, intuitive looper into the equation and, though it's easy to spend hours getting lost in a more and more kaleidoscopic Escher painting of layered parts, it's a powerful compositional aid.

Even if your pedalboard is in danger of becoming bigger than some of the stages you play on, it's worth exploring the other onboard effects, as there are some nice, grainy delays – again enhanced by the Super Wide Stereo – that are genuinely as good as those we've heard from many standalone delay units.

Whether you're a classic-rocker, a metalhead or a post-hardcore player, there's a flavour of dirt here for you

The various higher-gain voices on tap are refreshingly chewy and organic-sounding, with decent string separation maintained and, even if you go looking for it, there's very little of the fizz that so often plagues affordable high-gain amplifiers. Whether you are a classic-rocker, a metalhead, a punk or a post-hardcore player, there's sure to be a suitably aggressive flavour of dirt here for you; OD1 and OD2 even come with a preset gate that keeps unwanted noise in check without snapping shut when you really don't want it to.

At these prices, the amount that Blackstar has managed to cram in is bordering on the ridiculous – for many players in function bands, it would cost only your slice of the fee from one decent wedding gig to pay for either amp outright – so it seems almost mean-spirited to suggest that we'd like to have seen Bluetooth audio streaming thrown into the mix too.

Regardless, we find ourselves edging dangerously towards a phrase that's close to becoming as well-worn a cliche of guitar journalism as 'the dusty end' or 'plays like butter': 'we've really never had it so good, have we?' So, which one to buy? If you are regularly playing unmic'd pub gigs with a hard-hitting drummer, then go for the 150 just to be on the safe side. Otherwise, pocket the difference: the 100 will do nicely.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Impressively organic sounds
+ Enormous versatility
+ Staggering value for money
- Octave effect tracking can be a little glitchy

Light on your wallet and your back, the ID:Core Stereo 100 and 150 are loud, toneful and feature-packed

9/10

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Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Bad Cat USA Player Series Cub 15R

Bad Cat's latest Cub combo is a very different animal. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** cops a feline...

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **Morgan AC20 Deluxe** is the best modern EL84 amp we've heard, period. With switchable 12AX7 and EF86 preamp modes, the head version is **£1,699** while the 1x12 combo is **£1,999**. The **Vox AC15C1X** **£762** comes loaded with a Celestion Alnico Blue, plus onboard tremolo and reverb. The current **Matchless Lightning Reverb** model is **£2,295**.

We first got our hands on Bad Cat's prototype USA Player Series amps at Winter NAMM back in January 2016 and even amid the aural blizzard of the show floor we were impressed, particularly by the 15-watter. Months later, in considerably quieter test conditions in sunny South Wales, here's the production version.

Most people will know Bad Cat as the company founded by former Matchless designer Mark Sampson back in 2000. Though Sampson left the building a decade or so ago, under president John Thompson Bad Cat continues to manufacture high-end valve amplifiers that embody the boutique amp ethos that Sampson helped popularise back in the early 1990s.

It's not all about looking back though, and here on the USA Player Series Cub 15R, Bad Cat has swapped its customary hand-wired, point-to-point construction for PCBs – including PCB-mounted valve bases – and introduced plate-style digital reverb instead of a spring tank, all to drive down costs and assembly time and make for a more affordable amplifier for the real-world player.

Rather than outsource these models like some sort of 'budget' line, the USA Player Series is still hand-built in Bad Cat's Irvine, California facility featuring components and proprietary transformers consistent with those in the company's hand-wired Legacy Series amplifiers. The simplicity of the signal path has been maintained deliberately, but Bad Cat suggests that

the USA Player Series amps feel "a little more forgiving" than its costlier units.

In use

On powering up, we're greeted with the customary glowing logo and plugged in, though it may be a touch softer in terms of attack, there's a punch and an immediacy here that you don't often get from PCB designs, combined with the compression characteristics of a good dual-EL84 circuit.

Thanks in no small part to the efficient custom Celestion Vintage 30 and spacious, Baltic birch ply cabinet, this 15-watter has no difficulty being heard unmic'd at a gig with a drummer, but happily the K-master control (another feature from the Legacy Series, it's effectively a separate amplification circuit post phase inverter that's able to drive the power amp independently to the preamp) allows you to set your desired level of clean headroom with the preamp volume and dial in the overall output level to suit a variety of environments.

The original Sampson-era Cub was a descendent of the Matchless Lightning. The USA Player 15R's tones are definitely from the same Vox Top Boost-inspired branch of the amp family tree, but there are several gears of chime and growl available thanks to switchable 12AX7/EF86 V1 preamp valves and a fat boost. The EF86 mode is a little more aggressive and complex, with more perceived volume, than the 12AX7 setting, but our favourite sounds are in the mid-breakup zones of both voices.

Various sweet spots exist between 10 and 2 o'clock depending on your choice of guitar, and touch dynamics, chime and bite are present in abundance. The Cub 15R marries particularly well with PAF-style humbuckers and really brings them to life. Aside from a touch more mains hum and hiss than we'd like and the reverb being functional rather than sumptuous, there's much to admire here.

Guitar VERDICT

+ Excellent Vox-inspired tones that work particularly well with humbuckers
+ Loud enough for gigs, but sounds good at neighbour-friendly levels too
- Current weak pound makes this a better deal for stateside guitarists than for Brits

If you're looking for a slice of boutique EL84 tone for sensible money, the USA Player Series Cub 15R is a must-try

9/10

Bad Cat USA Player Series Cub 15R

- **PRICE** £1,329
- **DESCRIPTION** 1x12 single-channel Class A valve combo, PCB construction, solid-state rectified, digital reverb, made in USA
- **POWER** 15 watts
- **VALVES** 2x EL84 (power amp) 1x EF86, 2x 12AX7 (preamp), 1x 12AX7 (phase inverter)
- **FRONT PANEL** Input, volume, 2-position mini-toggle preamp selector, bass, fat switch, treble, reverb, cut, K-master
- **REAR PANEL** Power, standby, footswitch (for remote control of preamp & fat switches), 2x speaker outputs, 4/8/16-ohm impedance selector, effects send and return
- **CABINET** Baltic birch ply
- **SPEAKER** 12" Bad Cat custom-voiced Celestion Vintage 30
- **DIMENSIONS** 600(w)x480(h) x262mm(d)
- **WEIGHT** 44lb/19.9kg
- **OPTIONS** 15R head (£1,149), 40R head (£1,269), 40R combo (£1,379)
- **CONTACT** Coda Music 01438 350815 **coda-music.com** **badcatamps.com**

TwinStomp Deluxe pedals

Highly polished finish, highly polished performance? **RICHARD PURVIS** takes a shine to some UK-built dual delights

These sturdy, British-made stompboxes have some quirky design features, including an on/off toggle switch and a clever battery release system involving a keyring loop and a cable tie. Removing the four rubber feet even allows each unit to be screwed to a pedalboard. TwinStomp is all about boosting, driving and switching – there's no digital processing here – but the two-footswitch format does bring a fair bit of versatility to the party. In addition, each unit is available in an unpolished 'Standard' stainless steel enclosure for £30 less. The Standard units lack the bling of the Deluxe models, but are exactly the same on the inside.

KEY FEATURES

Booster MkIII Deluxe

- **PRICE** £189 (Standard version £159)
- **DESCRIPTION** Booster pedal. Made in UK
- **CONTROLS** Level 1, level 2; footswitches for bypass and channel select; on/off toggle switch; full/treble switch
- **FEATURES** True bypass; powered by 9v battery or DC adaptor (not supplied)
- **DIMENSIONS** 122mm(d) x120mm(w)x53mm(h)
- **CONTACT** 01746 780984 **www.twinstomp.com**

This version of the TwinStomp Booster is new for 2016, and what makes it new is the addition of a latching push switch on the side. What can it possibly be for, you might ask? All in good time – first we'll run through the pedal's more obvious functions. What you're getting here is two clean boosts in one. They sound pretty much identical with both knobs at halfway, but the one on the right blasts on up to 23dB, against 15dB on the left.

They're both nicely transparent, with just a hint of added top-end sparkle, and can easily be set for two very different levels of lift. And the switch on the side? This is supposed to turn it into a treble booster, and it does indeed thin out the lower frequencies, but on our review unit the difference was pretty subtle. The toggle switch on the top, meanwhile, enables you to turn the effect off, and thus save battery power, without pulling out your input lead and breaking the bypass signal. Nifty.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Two powerful clean boosters in one box
+ Impressively solid build quality
+ Bypass switch is a clever power-saving idea
– If only it had a more distinct, channel-assignable treble booster...

A tough and tasty dual booster – set channel 2 to full blast, point it at a not-quite-cooking amp and dive for cover

8/10

KEY FEATURES

S21 Overdrive Deluxe

- **PRICE** £225 (Standard version £195)
- **DESCRIPTION** Dual-overdrive pedal, made in UK
- **CONTROLS** Channel 1 distortion, tone and level; channel 2 distortion, tone and level; footswitches for bypass and channel select; on/off toggle switch
- **FEATURES** True bypass; powered by 9v battery or DC adaptor (not supplied)
- **DIMENSIONS** 122mm(d) x120mm(w)x53mm(h)

Two overdrives? Before your inner noise-anarchist gets too excited, we must explain that you can't run both of them at the same time; and while the controls are the same, these are two ODs with very different personalities. The left channel is good for low-to-medium gain with lots of added midrange bark and a notably soft edge to the attack – it's essentially Marshall-esque in character but darker than most pedals of that type, even with the tone set high. The right channel has a similarly mid-heavy voice, but brings a touch more gain and sharpens the top end for clear lead lines, even with humbuckers – it's still very British, but the contrast is obvious.

Another clever feature present on all four pedals is that the green and red status LEDs have a dim mode, which means you can see which channel you're going to be on when you come out of bypass. That's useful on the S21, with two channels capable of such different tones.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Offers chunky British overdrive as well as something a bit more feisty
+ Responsive controls add to the flexibility
– It's a shame you can't run one channel into the other for real sonic carnage

Two overdrives that are both quite fluffy around the edges, but between the two of them you'll cover a lot of rocking ground

8/10

KEY FEATURES

OD-Boost HR5 Deluxe

- **PRICE** £225 (Standard version £195)
- **DESCRIPTION** Overdrive and clean boost pedal, made in UK
- **CONTROLS** Overdrive and distortion, tone, level; booster level; independent bypass footswitches; on/off toggle switch
- **FEATURES** True bypass; powered by 9v battery or DC adaptor (not supplied)
- **DIMENSIONS** 122mm(d) x120mm(w)x53mm(h)

Guitar AWARD CHOICE 9/10

A single feature sets this unit apart from the other pedals in the series: it has two different effects, each with its own bypass footswitch, so it's not about channel switching anymore – you can use the overdrive, the boost or both at the same time.

There are, in fact, three versions of the OD-Boost – well, six if you factor in the Deluxe/Standard options – and while the other two are voiced like the green and red channels of the S21, this HR5 variant promises more drive than either.

This is, indeed, a slightly more punchy OD than the two in the S21, and it comes across brighter and more airy. The three controls are the same, but you don't need to do much with them to get chiming crunch and strident lead tones here. The 22dB booster does its job as expected, and the ability to engage both effects together for that big "Ladies and gentlemen, on lead guitar..." moment really opens up this pedal's usefulness.

Guitar VERDICT

+ Sweet overdrive and a wide gain range
+ Plenty of extra power from the clean boost
+ One box, one battery, but all the flexibility of two separate pedals

– We can't think of any negatives

The most obviously appealing of these four stompboxes – both effects are tasty, and when combined they're lethal

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Active A/B-Y MkII Deluxe

- **PRICE** £195 (Standard version £165)
- **DESCRIPTION** Active ABY pedal, made in UK
- **CONTROLS** Level A, Level B; footswitches for 'one or both' and 'A or B'; on/off toggle switch
- **FEATURES** True bypass; powered by 9v battery or DC adaptor (not supplied)
- **DIMENSIONS** 122mm(d)x120mm (w)x53mm(h)

Anyone gigging with two amps will already know there are plenty of passive ABY units out there for selecting one or the other, or both – and many of them are a whole lot cheaper than this. But TwinStomp's version, aside from being so solid you could use it to stop a steam train rolling down a hill, is active. You can boost the output levels just a little to compensate for any loss of clarity through long cable runs, and also use those big chunky controls to keep your two amps' volumes nicely balanced.

Another canny feature is a second 'amp B' output that's 180 degrees out of phase with the first one. This is an instant remedy for phase cancellation between the two amps, and it proved its worth in our testing – what began as an awkwardly scooped sound was transformed into room-flooding loveliness just by changing outputs. Flick the toggle switch to 'off' with this one and the true bypass signal will still go through, but only to amp A.

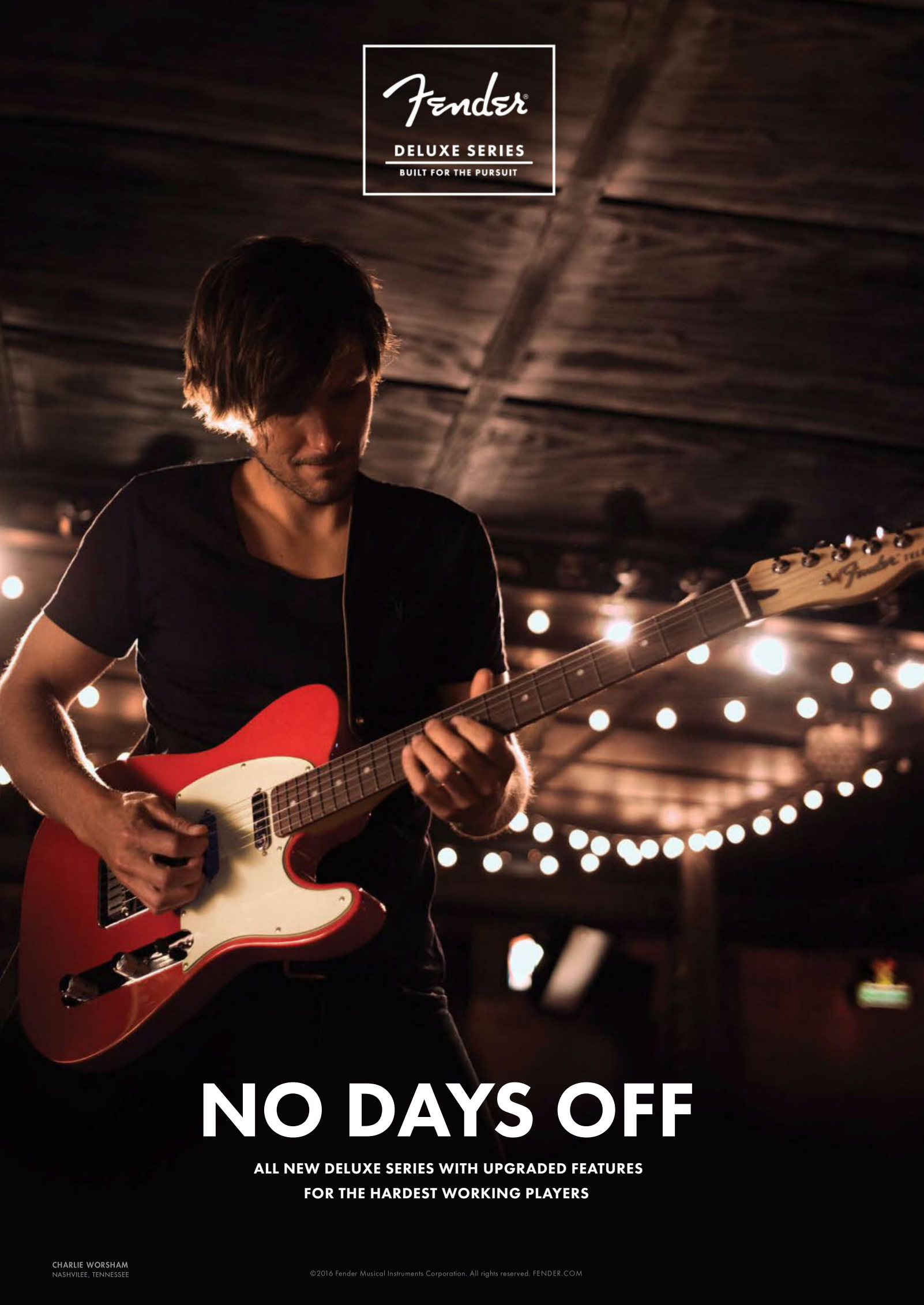
Guitar VERDICT

+ Simple functionality with the bonus of controllable levels
+ Can give just a hint of a clean boost
+ Handy extra output to avoid phase issues

– Could use a few more dB of boost

Not many players will be ready to invest this much in mere switching, but it's a beautifully made and probably nuke-proof unit

8/10



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Electro-Harmonix Soul POG

Two of EHX's most popular effects of recent times collide in this curious combination stompbox. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** plugs in...

The Electro-Harmonix Soul POG is one of the New York company's seemingly relentless stream of recent pedal releases and joins the Epitome, Holy Stain, Tone Tattoo and Turnip Greens in the 'multi-effect' category of the EHX catalogue. You might legitimately wonder why you wouldn't simply buy standalone Soul Food (£61) and Nano POG (£156) units and place them wherever you like in your effects chain, but the extra £2 that it costs to have both effects in the same box also buys you a couple of additional features in the shape of another mode on the Nano POG side and an effects send and return.

The mode switch offers either the familiar Nano POG algorithm or "upper octave notes with enhanced harmonics and improved polyphonic capabilities", while the send and return allows you to place external effects in the signal path between the overdrive and octave. In addition, the effects order switch allows you to decide whether the Soul Food or Nano POG comes first in the chain.

We're pleased to see the Nano POG's separate wet and dry outputs have been retained. The ability to send effected and uneffected signals to different amps means things can get very interesting indeed, especially if you are in one of those 'so hot right now' two-piece bands: guitarists can use the pedal to send a sub octave to a bass amp, while bassists can go down the Royal Blood route and siphon an upper octave off to a dirty guitar amp. Very cool.

In use

The Soul Food is, of course, a clone of the Klon Centaur. In a direct comparison with the J Rockett Archer Ikon – our favourite 'klone', that's become a fixture as a clean boost on this writer's 'board – the Archer is a little sweeter, with extra clarity and sophistication; but the differences are in the fine detail, and the slightly brasher Soul Food certainly doesn't disgrace itself.

The synthetic sheen of the upper-octave tones played clean helps the unit deliver convincing organ-style sounds

Where the real fun lies is on the Nano POG side. Adding a sub octave begs for dirt, and though like many klones the Soul Food can get rather nasal at higher drive settings, backing off the treble and running it before the POG fattens things up nicely and creates some really raunchy tones that are ideal for sleazy single-note Tom Morello-style riffing.

Fans of that other high-profile octave merchant, Jack White, are equally well served – introducing the upper octave creates some really searing lead tones, but be careful with that treble! The octave side also plays nicely with other overdrives – we particularly enjoyed the combination of a Tube Screamer and sub octave for thick alt-rock riffing.

The tracking in both POG modes is fast and works as advertised, while the synthetic sheen of the upper-octave tones played clean helps the unit deliver convincing organ-style sounds. With the mode LED illuminated, it's like pulling drawbars out on an old Hammond and extending the high-end brilliance. When using the upper octave without the sub, nobody is going to believe you're playing a 12-string, but mixed in subtly it gets your six-string closer to the right ballpark.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Flexible connectivity options
+ An array of useful classic and contemporary octave sounds
+ The Soul Food does a decent Klon impression

- Treble content can get a little fierce
- If you already have overdrives that you favour, it might be simpler to purchase a standalone Nano POG

Fuzz may have seemed a more natural bedfellow for EHX's excellent octaver, but the Soul POG combination works surprisingly well and encourages creative thinking

8/10

KEY FEATURES

Electro-Harmonix Soul POG

- **PRICE** £219
- **DESCRIPTION** Buffered-bypass overdrive and polyphonic octave multi-effect pedal, 9V AC adaptor supplied
- **CONTROLS** Soul Food: effect on/off, drive, treble, volume POG: effect on/off, dry, sub octave, octave, two-position mode switch. Global two-position effect order mini-toggle switch
- **CONNECTIONS** Input, send, return, dry out, effect out
- **CONTACT** Electro-Harmonix **www.ehx.com**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Aside from pairing EHX's **Nano POG £156** with dirtboxes of your choice, you could try the **MXR Slash Octave Fuzz £142** for hairier sub and octave-up sounds. The **Dwarfcraft Gears £189** is a leftfield choice with overdrive, sub-octave generation, a resonant filter and expression pedal input.

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Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Xotic Wah XW-1

A high-end wah that offers a virtually limitless tonal palette. **SIMON BRADLEY** separates the wheat from the Shaft

The first wah to be made available commercially was the result of a collaboration between Vox and a noted jazz trumpeter named Clyde McCoy, who'd approached the company to produce something that mimicked the tone of a muted brass instrument and could be used with a keyboard. Taking the chassis of a volume pedal as a starting point, members of the design team duly obliged and the now-legendary Clyde McCoy Wah was introduced.

The XW-1, the first wah from renowned US effects manufacturer Xotic, is based unashamedly on the Italian-made McCoy from the late 1960s and, what's more, its spec incorporates as exhaustive a selection of tone-shaping controls as we've seen on a pedal of this kind. These include a quartet of micro-pots sited unobtrusively along the pedal's right side, an internal trim pot for setting the input gain and, again inside the pedal, a further four dip switches that allow settings such as the Q frequency, amount of presence cut and treble frequency in the treadle's toe-down range to be fine-tuned.

Other notable features include the on/off LED that flashes conveniently when the battery drops below 50 per cent charge and, last but not least, its size. The XW-1 is smaller in footprint than, for example, a Vox V847 (a footprint of 210cm^2, compared to the 257cm^2 of the Vox), which is good news if, like ours, your pedalboard resembles the car deck of a cross-channel ferry.

Everything within is exceedingly neat and, with true bypass courtesy of gold contact relays, and a nylon bushing pivot that does away with the need for gobs of grease to ensure a smooth operation, we're so far very impressed.

The spec incorporates as exhaustive a selection of tone-shaping controls as we've seen on a pedal of this kind

In use

We begin by leaving all the controls in their factory default positions, which quickly enables us to discover just how clean the effect is. That's not to say it's in any way sterile, more that there's no pedal scratch, extraneous hiss or unwanted crackles to speak of. As we wind up the amp gain, we find ourselves reaching for the treble pot to take off some of the high end, but that's the beauty of the XW-1: you can set it to your preference and wail away.

We did find we needed to match the wah output to that of the dry amp signal, which involves removing the baseplate to access the input gain trimmer, and we'd suggest that you'll need to do this when using guitars loaded with pickups of differing output levels, too. Would it have been better to site this important control alongside the four pots on the chassis? It'd certainly have been more convenient.

That's the only gripe, though, and the sheer variety of wahs is staggering. All it can take is the merest twist of the bias or wah-Q pots to find something genuinely inspiring, and experimenting with the wah-Q frequency dip switch should also not be missed. With a clean, lightly overdriven or high-gain tone, the wah keeps its character and, in case you were wondering, we didn't notice its slightly smaller size under our size 12s.

Grappling with a series of small pots may not be every guitarist's cup of tea but, pricey though the XW-1 is, the resultant versatility puts it right up there with the very best wahs on the market today.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Outstanding construction
+ Smaller footprint
+ Excellent tonal quality
+ Versatile

- Hard-to-access gain trimmer
- Pro-level pricing
- May be unnecessarily complex for some

A high-quality and compact wah that ticks all the boxes with a slew of inspiring tonal features and a build quality to match its boutique price

9/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fulltone's **Clyde Deluxe** **£205** has a 10-stage variable input and three modes, while the **Morley M2 Maverick Contour Wah** **£156** has two modes. Purists should try the legendary **Vox V847** **£79**.

KEY FEATURES

Xotic Wah XW-1

- **PRICE** £287
- **DESCRIPTION** Analogue wah pedal with true bypass and a number of tone-tailoring options. Powered by internal 9v PP3 battery or optional 10mA/9v DC PSU
- **CONTROLS** Bias, wah-Q, treble and bass pots, plus four internal dip switches and input gain trimmer
- **FEATURES** On/off treadle-operated footswitch, mono 1/4-inch input and output
- **DIMENSIONS** 100(W)x67(H) x210mm(D)
- **CONTACT** Andertons Music 01483 456777 **www.xoticeffects.com**

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Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

MXR M300 Reverb

It's taken MXR a while to bring a reverb pedal to market. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** finds out if it was worth the wait...

MXR's M300 Reverb was one of our highlights of this year's Winter NAMM in January thanks to the sheer amount of sounds and functionality it packs into a compact enclosure. Despite its simple, three-knob configuration, there's plenty going on under the hood.

Pressing the tone knob allows you to cycle through six digital reverb algorithms, from plate, spring and room emulations to the more esoteric mod, epic and pad modes. In addition to giving us control over the decay and dry/wet mix, the M300 features an expression pedal input for hands-free sweeps between two settings (within one reverb style at a time only, expression pedal not included), while setting the internal stereo/mono switch to stereo and hooking up the pedal with TRS cables facilitates the unit's stereo in/out capability.

To access even more features, put the pedal in startup mode by disconnecting the power supply (battery power isn't an option), setting the decay and mix controls to noon and pushing and holding down the tone knob while reconnecting the power source. You can then switch from the default true-bypass mode to a buffered bypass that allows trails to decay naturally when the effect is switched off. The wet mode can also be accessed should you want to send only the wet signal to your amp.

In use

Although all reverb effects, digital or analogue, tend to add a little hiss, we're impressed by the M300's low noise floor. It's quieter than the other digital units we used for comparison and slightly less hissy than the spring reverb tank in our valve combo, so that's a really good start. Switching reverb styles is easy, and it doesn't take long to get used to the colour-coded system of three LEDs that light up green or red depending on which voice is selected.

Most guitarists who love reverb fall into either the vintage or ambient camp, and both are well catered for here

Most guitarists who love reverb fall into either the vintage or ambient camp, and both are well catered for here. The plate, spring and room modes have a convincing depth and sense of physical space, and record very well. Darker tone settings yield impressively authentic, retro-flavoured results.

While we've yet to hear a digital spring reverb emulation that fully captures the splashy white-knuckle ride of the real thing, we were able to dial in the M300 so it sounded close enough for most applications. On the ambient side of things, the epic (multiple, interconnected, modulated delays) and pad (octave up and down synth sounds with reverb) modes are post-rock in a can, particularly when used with an expression pedal, allowing you to create huge swells by sweeping from subtle colouration to widescreen soundscapes. Your guitar's volume control – or a volume pedal – is your friend here, too. Fans of Oceansize or Explosions In The Sky will be right at home.

Although we're not totally sold on the order in which the effects are presented – a system based on the smallest to largest 'space' would make more sense than this rather arbitrary sequence – there's very little to complain about. The mod setting (modulated studio-style plate reverb) is a little uninspiring and we'd rather have seen, say, a hall reverb included, but this is a great, convenient and inspiring stompbox.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Less noisy and less synthetic-sounding than much of the competition
+ Intelligent use of a small footprint
+ Voiced to suit a broad range of tastes

- Modulated reverb setting somewhat undercooked

It's not the cheapest, nor does it have the most reverb voices in a small stompbox format, but the M300 nails it sonically, where it really counts

9/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE

TC Electronic's **Hall Of Fame** **£117** probably wins the 'most sounds in a small footprint' war thanks in part to the fact that you can beam artist presets into it via the TonePrint function. For serious reverb junkies, the **Eventide Space** **£459** and **Strymon BigSky** **£399** are vying for the top of the charts.

KEY FEATURES

MXR M300 Reverb

- **PRICE** £187
- **DESCRIPTION** Six-voice digital reverb pedal with mono or stereo operation, true or buffered bypass, analogue dry path
- **CONTROLS** Decay, tone, mix. Tone control doubles as reverb style selector cycling through plate, spring, epic, mod, room and pad modes
- **CONNECTIONS** Instrument in/out, expression pedal input
- **CONTACT** Westside Distribution 0844 326 2000 **www.jimdunlop.com**

Sandberg Forty Eight Bass

Sandberg's striking new boutique bass is named after a classic motorcycle engine. **GARETH MORGAN** takes it for a ride...

We first encountered Sandberg basses 12 years ago, and since then we've been treated to regular additions to the company's catalogue, most recently in the shape of the splendid California T and V Series instruments. Now, Holger Stonjek and the team have developed a brand new model, one that's designed for those with rock 'n' roll in their blood, and called it the Forty Eight.

Its moniker pays homage to an iconic motorcycle engine produced in 1948 by Harley-Davidson, a brand synonymous with the golden era of rock 'n' roll, and the design intelligently evokes two similarly iconic rock basses. The upper half is reminiscent of Gibson's classic Thunderbird, with fin-shaped rear bout, stumpy front section and no cutaway. The bottom half, with its tortoiseshell scratchplate-adorned dorsal fin horn and triangular rear bout, has the spikier Explorer to thank for its genesis. It's the expert combination of both vibes, with subtly added curves, that makes this instrument so striking, and the sublime aged finish of our review model supports that vibe very nicely.

The central section is a carved ridge that fans out to the rear and houses two Sandberg pickups with metal covers – a Powerhumbucker (front) and Splitcoil (back) – as well as Sandberg's 3D bridge. These, and the rest of the hardware, are aged classily. Sandberg has utilised the same supremely playable Canadian hardrock maple neck as on the California Series, with six-bolt retention system. This, together with California Series headstock equipped with the company's lightweight aluminium tuners, ensures the Forty Eight displays better balance than the models that influenced its design. The fingerboard is rosewood and carries 22 expertly seated medium nickel frets, with position markers along the top edge only. We get active electronics, featuring Sandberg's own preamp that hitches up the Powerhumbucker/Splitcoil combo to controls numbering volume, balance and a two-band EQ.

As always with Sandberg's boutique basses, various elements are customisable, including fingerboard wood and inlays, hardware and pickguard colours and finishes.

Sounds

If you really fancy one of these basses and you're unfamiliar with the genus in a playing sense, be aware it takes time to get used to how they feel. The tonal story starts with decent width, and a pleasing growl at the E string and a nice aggressive vibe across the neck. The nasal edge isn't excessive and helps the Forty Eight in the audibility stakes.

Highs don't explode, but you wouldn't expect them to, and they're plentiful enough for decent cut and bite. The front pickup is thuddier and more P Bass-like, and the Splitcoil spits out a barkier tone that's tight and snappy. Introducing EQ is a positive move, as the additional thump from increased bass creates a wide, silky retro-rock tone, making the funkier bridge option more practical and aggressive and smoothing out the nasal edge in twin mode without killing definition. Boosting the treble gets you sharper note edges without excessive clank, the wiry quality of the neck sound proving especially enjoyable. All in all, there's a great deal of fun to be had...

Guitar VERDICT

+ Looks the business
+ Excellent attention to detail in design and build
+ Fulfils its tonal brief with practical, easy-to-obtain variations
+ Good roster of custom options
- High-register access pretty restricted

A really well put together bass that easily reaches the lofty hard-rocking heights it's designed for – in both appearance and sound

9/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **Gibson Thunderbird Bass £1,599** is a rock 'n' roll classic. There's also the **Fender American Standard Jaguar Bass £1,399** with P/J pickup, active electronics and lots of tonal options. You might want to consider a **Warwick Reverso Rex Brown Signature**, but it'll cost you **€5,598**.

KEY FEATURES

Sandberg Forty Eight Bass

- **PRICE** £1,770 (basic model from £1,336), inc padded gigbag
- **DESCRIPTION** Single-cutaway solidbody bass. Made in Germany
- **BUILD** Alder body with hardcore aged finish, bolt-on hardrock maple neck with 22 medium nickel frets on a rosewood fingerboard. Sandberg aluminium tuners and Sandberg 3D bridge. Aged nickel hardware
- **ELECTRICS** Active with Sandberg-designed preamp, 1x Sandberg Powerhumbucker (front) and 1x Sandberg Splitcoil (back) pickup
- **CONTROLS** Volume (pull for passive mode), balance, bass and treble
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes, at no extra cost
- **FINISHES** Various matt or aged finishes available, high-gloss black only
- **SCALE LENGTH** 864mm/34"
- **NECK WIDTH** 40mm at nut, 56mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 11mm at nut, 19.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.78kg/8.33lbs
- **CONTACT** Synergy Distribution 0121 2706485 **www.sandberg-guitars.de**

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Nemphasis Oxygen Bass Preamp pedals

A pair of Italian tone-shaping preamp pedals for bassists

PRICE £149 & £189 **CONTACT** www.madisonandfifth.co.uk

Hailing from Calvisano, Italy, Nemphasis is the brainchild of electronics engineer Matteo Bresciani, who has been producing top-quality analogue guitar and bass pedals since 2011. Its latest offerings for bassists are the rather swanky 02 Oxygen Bass Preamp pedal and its Pro Series sister unit.

Both chassis are made from die-cast aluminium, which is robust and offers excellent EMI/RFI (radio frequency interference) shielding. The blue 02 is a standard rectangular stompbox shape, while the creamy white Pro Series is squarer – the former accepting either a nine-volt DC adaptor or battery power, the Pro Series version being confined to mains. The basic unit has businesslike white plastic knobs and the Pro Series unit sports chunkier, black dials, with controls numbering gain, level, bass, mid and treble on both.

The 02 has a toggle switch for either a boosted or scooped mids pre-shape, and the Pro has a mode stomp switch. Igniting this function changes the LED from green to red and your sound from a warmer, smoother offering with bottom-end emphasis to a punchier, more up-front variation with higher output. The Pro Series pedal also sports a balanced DI Out XLR socket and ground/lift switch.

In use

Both pedals are engineered to a high standard, which means no clicks and pops when you stomp. As with all preamps, you can utilise the tonal variation on offer or just the level and gain for volume boost.

The basic 02 forces a scooped mids or subtly boosted midrange scenario on the user, although the EQ has enough potency to counteract either toggle switch preset with plenty of clean punch from the mid EQ, as well as plenty of bass and treble. You'll find dialing in gain results in distortion, especially with powerful active basses, and it's the same with the Pro 02, albeit to a slightly lesser degree. It offers the same by way of decent tonal variations with sensible attenuation of boost levels, but note that the boosted mids pre-shape (red LED) is a more tonally coloured starting point. Elsewhere, the XLR DI Out is a useful feature. **GM**

Guitar VERDICT

A pair of top-notch preamps made to exacting standards and offering pretty much everything you would expect. Sure, the RRPs are on the steep side and both are set up with pre-determined midrange levels, but the variations on offer and quality of sound make either unit well worth investing in

9/10

Snark Picks

Two new types of pick, one that mimics the feel of genuine tortoiseshell

PRICE From £3.99 per pack of 12 **CONTACT** www.jhs.co.uk

Tortoiseshell is a familiar term for what is an increasingly uncommon substance. It was taken from the carapaces of marine turtles, most notably the now critically endangered Hawksbill turtle. Happily, you won't find a legally-produced pick fashioned from genuine shell anywhere these days: the global trade in all species of marine turtle has been banned since the early 70s.

There are numerous modern equivalents, ranging from the wallet-busting Golden Gate MP-20 mock turtle flat pick ($129.99 for 12) to options for the more modest of income, such as these new Teddy's Neo Tortoise picks from Snark. Intended to provide a similar playing experience to a genuine shell pick, they have been released alongside sets of celluloid picks – Sigmund Freud's Celluloids.

We asked Snark to point out the major differences. "Sigmund picks are celluloid, but made by a different process, so are less prone to breaking and tearing than conventional celluloid," the American company tells us. "The Teddy's picks are a completely different material. We don't disclose what it is, but we have named it Neo Tortoise. It's stiffer than celluloid, so gives more attack."

With some snazzy packaging that includes a free pick file, both types are available in four gauges. Somewhat confusingly, Snark suggest that the Teddy's feel like picks that are slightly thinner than their stated value: the .78, for example, apparently 'plays like' a .73. Make of that what you will, but we don't feel it will make the buying decision any simpler.

In use

Both types are tactile and easy to use and, thanks to 30 hours of polishing, possess lovely smooth edges. There's no string drag and the old adage of 'as comfortable as an old pair of shoes' is applicable.

We focused on the 1mm Sigmund and a .94 Teddy's (that plays like a .88...) with both acoustic and electric guitars and didn't feel our technique to be compromised in any way. The sonic differences are subtle, but the tone using both the Sigmund and Teddy's is more vibrant than our go-to 1mm Dunlop Nylon. The attack is warmer, too. We're happy to recommend you try one or two when you can; you may be as pleasantly surprised as we were. Save a turtle and improve your tone in one fell swoop. **SB**

Guitar VERDICT

A pick is a very personal choice, and these are well worth checking out

8/10

TONY BACON

Tony Bacon is an author and journalist who writes about musical instruments, musicians and music. His books include *The Ultimate Guitar Book*, *History Of The American Guitar* and *Sunburst*, and his latest is *The SG Guitar Book* (Backbeat), which tells the story of a great Gibson guitar design

IS INNOVATION DEAD?

Are things really getting better all the time? Or are we just suffering from acute 'anticipointment', asks **TONY BACON**

Everything improves all the time. That's the promise of technology. It's designed to make us want the new stuff and shun the old stuff. Often, of course, we know better, but sometimes the lure of that shiny new thing makes us want it oh so much, and then we might experience anticipointment.

Apparent progress is all around us: increasingly sophisticated smartphones; speakers that conjure deep bass from tiny boxes; enormous headphones that sound like... ah, well maybe not everything. Perhaps we've become accustomed to stuff improving, but is there any true innovation anymore? When was the last time you looked at a new guitar or pedal and thought to yourself, 'wow! I've never seen anything like that before'. More likely, I find, is that we think, 'well, yes, a little bit of that from the old such-and-such model, plus some of this from that vintage thing over there...' all recognisable, done before, and now smartly topped off with a lick of faddish paint and a buzzy name.

"Everything improves all the time. That's the promise of technology"

There's a thing called expectation bias, which is a rather fancy way of describing that common thing when we see and hear what we expect to see and hear rather than what's actually going on. For example, let's say you've been told that a particular guitar lead or HDMI cable is worth 10 times the regular price because it has this wonderful, almost magical fidelity. Only those truly in the know can hear this. Far be it from you, then, to have doubts about it when you plug one in.

Usually, we just bury any uncertainty and hesitation, opting to be at one with the in crowd. You expect, therefore it must deliver. Never mind your critical faculties, mate. Innovation is what we all want from technology, apparently. It reminds us we're alive. But innovation doesn't necessarily mean more complex. It can mean simplifying, getting down to the essentials. It should also mean going forward: revealing the future before it happens.

You may have noticed the fact that the year we're in right now is 50 years since 1966: you know... World Cup glory, *Revolver* on every turntable, mini-skirts agogo. It all sounds rather pleasant, especially if you were in a particular square mile in London. There was a TV show on recently in the Imagine series, imaginatively called *1966* and linked to a book of the same name by Jon Savage. Amid all the great footage and cultural bluster, there was a clip of an interview with The Beatles, on tour in Chicago in August of The Great Year. "You've gone a long way from *I Want To Hold Your Hand* to *Eleanor Rigby*," said a bored-sounding reporter at the press conference. "What direction are you trying to aim your music?" Paul McCartney waded in bravely. "We're just trying to move it in a forward direction," he explained, hopefully. "We're just trying to move forward." It's a simple mantra that any band member could usefully adopt, whether it's 1966, 2016, or 2066. Go forward. Innovate. Do your own thing.

When I interviewed McCartney some time in the 90s, he introduced me to that new word I used at the top: anticipointment. It was around the time The Beatles had that rather questionable 'reunion' for *Free As A Bird*. Anyway, McCartney excused himself from playing me a preview of the then-unheard recording. "There's a thing called anticipointment – have you heard of that? It's a good word," he said with a smile. "You build up, say, a film so much, then you go to see it... and it's like 'well, I didn't think it was that good'. Sometimes things are never quite as good as people say."

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Vintage TIME MACHINES

1965 FENDER JAGUAR

This glorious sunburst Jag bears the scars of five decades of live action. It's a guitar that begs to be played...

When most people think of Fender guitars, they think of the Stratocaster and Telecaster. And then there's everything else. But the Jazzmaster and Jaguar are currently enjoying a resurgence, as evidenced by social media posts and searches and sales on Reverb.com (think MIJ reissues).

In many ways, the Jaguar was designed to improve upon the Jazzmaster. It kept what players liked (comfortable offset body, unique slide and switch tone controls) and addressed some complaints (pickups vulnerable to noise). With metal sawtooth shielding on powerful single-coil pickups and a shorter 24-inch scale, the Jaguar became popular in the surf-rock scene and later reappeared in the hands of grunge icon Kurt Cobain, but was never lionised by blues-rockers like the Strat and Tele.

This transition-era beauty is proof that there are plenty of post-'64 Fender specimens that have the feel of earlier models without the eye-watering price tags. It also represents something of a sweet spot – a less-popular model in player-grade condition, made during an era looked down upon by many collectors.

This example was manufactured a mere three years after the model's 1962 debut, with the original design mostly unchanged. While CBS officially acquired Fender in early 1965, it took a few years for the company to make the changes that many feel diluted the quality and feel of the brand. The only major changes in '65 were a switch from clay to pearloid dot inlays and the addition of binding to the fretboard (seen by many as a plus).

The usual suspects that threaten originality with mid-60s Fenders – refinished bodies, swapped electronics, missing parts – thankfully don't apply to this specimen. The original string mute, bridge cover and whammy bar are all intact; the switches work; the original case is still usable. But the real reason we love this Jaguar is the history written all over it in the perfect poetry of scratches, dings and wear from years of playing. When a guitar has been played this much, it's a clear sign that it gives much joy. That it begs players to come back to it. That it could've been put in a closet but was just too much fun for that.

History is written all over it in the perfect poetry of scratches, dings and wear

These days, when offset-mania has reached fever pitch and the Fender Custom Shop is cranking out purposely worn vintage-spec instruments that cost more than this seller's asking price, we wonder whether that classic line sung by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell applies here: Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby.

VITAL STATISTICS

1965 Fender Jaguar

- **PRICE** £2,750
- **YEAR** 1965
- **TYPE** Solidbody electric guitar
- **BUILD** Alder body in 3-Tone Sunburst
- **REVERB SELLER** Nicks Guitars Reverb.com/shop/nicksguitars
- **SEE MORE** Reverb.com/UK

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Fender Deluxe
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Vintage BENCH TEST

1962 GUILD T-100 DP 'SLIM JIM'

Often overlooked, Guild's early-60s semis offer some of the best vintage bargains in all of guitardom.

HUW PRICE picks a winner

On the one hand, I'm absolutely astonished by the build quality of this 1962 Guild because it's easily on a par with similar Gibsons of the era, and way superior to pretty much any vintage Gretsch. On the other, I really shouldn't be considering the heritage of the Guild Guitar Company.

Although Guild was started by retailer Alfred Dronge and former Epiphone executive George Mann in 1952, many of the company's early employees had worked at Epiphone prior to its relocation to Philadelphia. Rooted firmly in the New York archtop tradition, it was said at the time that those five employees brought more than 200 years of combined guitar-building experience to Guild. Not bad for a startup.

The build quality of this instrument is easily on a par with similar Gibsons of the era

However, rather than anchoring itself to a fast-fading jazz scene, Guild set about making innovative flat top acoustics, electric basses and laminated thinlines, as well as hand-carved jazz guitars. This month's offering is a 1962 T-100 DP Slim Jim, and it's in pretty remarkable condition.

It features a two-inch deep three-ply maple body with a set mahogany neck and a bound 20-fret fingerboard that appears to be Brazilian rosewood. The controls may be conventional, but the layout isn't because the two volume controls are situated above the tone controls. The carved rosewood bridge and pickguard both appear to be original and are in fine shape. However, the Bigsby is a later addition and it seems to be of recent manufacture. >

The plywood back extends across the neck heel to form an integrated heel cap. This well established technique is more commonly associated with classical builders

KEY FEATURES

'62 Guild T-100 DP Slim Jim

- **PRICE** £1,400
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollowbody electric guitar, made in the USA
- **BUILD** Laminated maple body, set mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard with pearl dots and 21 frets, height-adjustable rosewood bridge
- **HARDWARE** Bigsby vibrato, Waverly tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two single-coil Franz pickups, individual volume and tone, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 626mm/24 5/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 22mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 50mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3kg/6.6lb
- **FINISH** Two-tone Sunburst
- **CONTACT** Cranes Music 029 2039 8215 **www.cranes.co.uk**

Above **If you don't want the Bigsby, the original tailpiece is in the case**
Opposite page, top **The bespoke knobs and metal marker pins are classy features**
Bottom **If these Waverly tuners are new, they cost someone a small fortune, but they're top quality and no extra holes have been made**

Fortunately, the original Guild tailpiece is tucked away safely inside the original Guild-branded case, along with a period leather strap. The only other non-original parts are the locking strap buttons. Some earlier Slim Jims have the same type of Waverly open gears used by Gretsch during that era. Later examples have the modern-style Waverly 'Butterbeans', and since no extraneous screw holes or tell-tale 'footprints' can be seen, I think these tuners are either original or the original type. Either way, they work superbly, but if they're modern replacements that's considerable added value.

People often describe the pickups Guild used during this era as 'P-90 types', but they were made by a company called Franz in New York. Structurally, there are similarities because these have two magnets beneath a single coil resting on a metal base plate with bent edges and 5/40 fillister head screws. The neck and bridge pickups have different screw spacings to align better with the strings, and DC resistance readings vary from around 4.5k ohms to over 8k. The low-wind ones were used on the jazz models, and this Slim Jim's read 4.88k and 4.92k. Later Slim Jims have smaller rectangular pickups built by Guild with bought-in coils, but the Franz pickups are generally considered the ones to have. They also appeared on the guitars of other manufacturers, including D'Angelico, so Guild wasn't going for a cheap option.

There are certain subtle construction details that demonstrate Guild's high standards. For instance, the corners are rolled over so smoothly where the back meets the sides, and the lacquer is so dark, that you cannot see the join. It looks almost as if the back and sides are carved from a single piece of wood.

Then there's the way the back extends over the heel to act as an integrated heel cap. It's a traditional classical guitar building technique that maybe adds some degree of stability because this neck hasn't moved a jot in 55 years.

I'm not certain what brand of switch Guild used, but this one has such a firm and positive feel it doesn't seem like the usual period Switchcraft. Or maybe this is just what they felt like when new. Guild also used three screws to keep the 'poker chip' switch surround from spinning. The Guild-branded control knobs were obviously bespoke, and tiny metal position reference dots are set into the body just outside the edge of the skirt.

The headstock overlay is peeling off slightly, but it would be well within the scope of any enthusiastic amateur to fix it back down. There are a few chips and dents around the back edges, a bit of rub through under the bridge and some colour fading on the back of the neck, but all things considered, this Slim Jim looks about 40 years younger than it actually is. >

GUILD

WAVERLY

GUILD

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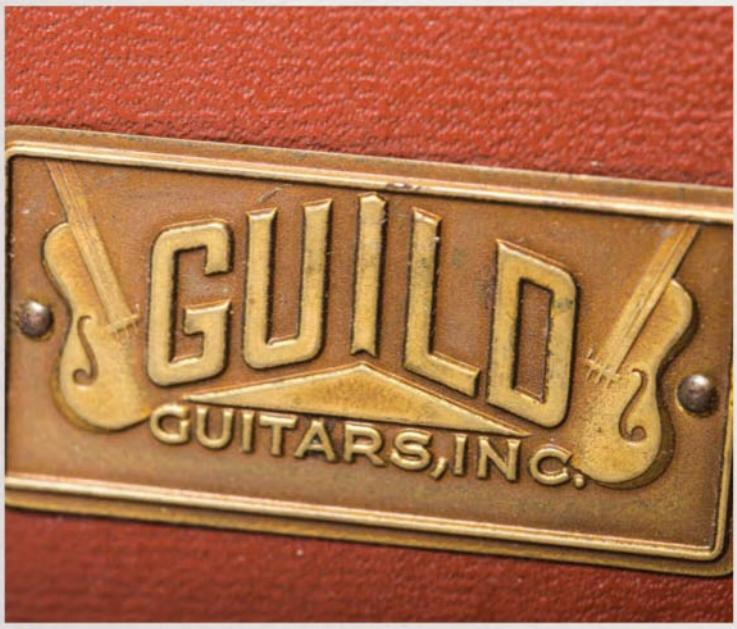
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In use

Although the bridge is adjusted down as far as it can go, the action still feels a little high. I'm certain there's nothing wrong with the neck angle or joint, so the solution would be to remove material from the bridge base. There's lots of it, so that wouldn't be an issue, but the pickups sit high, and there may be some risk of the strings contacting the covers.

Acoustically, the Slim Jim is loud and bright with a naturally snappy twang and lots of sustain, but it doesn't go that deep in the bass. Even so, it's fun to play unplugged with its surprisingly modern-feeling medium C neck profile, and the tuning is commendably stable.

Although the Franz pickups have some P-90 attributes, their tone is cleaner, clearer and quicker to respond. The downside is less warm woodiness and a low-end response that could be described as either lean or well defined. My favourite aspect is the way they combine a pretty and almost delicate treble response with a subtle underlying growl.

In perhaps over-simplified terms, the Slim Jim sounds somewhere between a thinline Gibson with P-90s and a Gretsch. It is maybe smoother and more refined than a Gretsch but zingier and ringier than a Gibson, albeit with lower output level.

It is maybe smoother and more refined than a Gretsch but zingier and ringier than a Gibson, with lower output

It's a guitar built more for rock 'n' roll than jazz. Although you can dial down the treble quite easily, it's hard to compensate for the lack of fullness with equalisation alone. It's also so lively played clean that you might feel the need for some compression. That said, overdriven amps are naturally more compressed and the Franz pickups work superbly with slight overdrive and full-on distortion alike, as clarity is never lost. In fact, I'd bet most vintage Slim Jims have spent more time bashing out *Louis Louis* in suburban garages than *My Funny Valentine* in local pizza joints. So, 60s rhythm, bluesy soloing and even proto punk are all on the menu. I particularly enjoyed sending the Slim Jim's pingy exuberance through copious amounts of reverb for psychedelic soundtrack fun, as well as rockabilly tunes with a little slapback.

Although it feels slightly stiff with a set of 11s, this is a superbly built instrument that's just a decent setup away from a new lease of life. Where else could you find a 55-year-old American thoroughbred in this condition for less than £1,500?

Above **Although they look similar to P-90s, these are Franz pickups made in Queens, New York City, and they're highly regarded**
Opposite page, top left **The headstock has a plastic overlay with pearloid logos. In real life, it looks better than it sounds, but it has started peeling off**
Top right **The serial number on the back of the headstock corresponds with a manufacture date of 1962**
Bottom left **The original case is a high-quality item with this metal Guild badge on the side**
Bottom right **How to stop the poker chip spinning around – fix it to the body with screws**

Vintage PRIVATE COLLECTION

HERE COMES THE SUNBURST

Bill Tonkin is a die-hard Beatles fan who plays the part of George Harrison in a Fab Four tribute band. **LARS MULLEN** takes a look at his George-influenced collection

"Life for me started to change when I turned 40 in 1993," explains Bill Tonkin, guitarist in Beatles tribute band Not The Beatles. "My daughter came home from school after a lesson about how bad smoking was for you. She was so convincing and sad about my 30-a-day addiction, I gave up there and then. I'd also just changed jobs and now worked with a guy who was a brilliant classical guitar player. I wasn't a player then, but I explained to my wife Carole how I was enthralled by the looks and sound of the guitar.

"I also thought that if you work hard, and if you don't spend any spare cash that you have, you are working for nothing and, for me, guitars are the best thing to spend money on.

"At the time, she made it clear how much money I was saving from packing up smoking and suggested that I buy a guitar. From here on, I have to say that although I know what I want and what I'm looking for in a guitar, Carole has been responsible on more than one occasion for the guitars I own today.

"I didn't go down the classical road, but bought a white late-80s Japanese '57 reissue Strat from a guitarist in Cornwall called Chili Dog Slim, and being a George Harrison fan, I had a friend paint the body and scratchplate in the design of George Harrison's Rocky. I've since removed the artwork from the body and just kept it on the scratchplate.

"As George Harrison once said: 'The Beatles saved the world from boredom'. I certainly agree with that. I'm from The Beatles' era, and after a few of us got together to casually play some of the Fab Four's classic songs, we realised we all had something in common.

"My main guitar is a Gretsch Country Classic II. It's backed up by my Cherry Gibson SG from 1983"

"We have been gigging regularly as Not The Beatles in the south west, where I'm taking George Harrison's guitar and vocal parts. Hence, I have many of the models he used, along with a selection of Vox amps and cabs which I use live, including a pair of Vox Grenadier columns from '66, a Vox Supreme also from the mid 60s, a Conqueror 2x12 cab and a reissue AC30.

"I swap guitars around a lot during the set, although my main guitar is a Gretsch Country Classic 11. I think this model was only built between '80 and '92. It's backed up by my Cherry Red Gibson SG from '83, to which I have thought >

Above **Bill Tonkin with his Rocky-inspired late-80s '57 reissue Strat**
Opposite page, top **Bill as George playing his '97 Epiphone Casino in front of his Vox amp collection, and (l-r) Hofner reissue bass, Rickenbacker 4003, Japanese rosewood Telecaster, Gretsch Country Classic II, '83 Gibson SG**
Middle left (l-r) **Squier Tele in Hot Rod Red, Squier Classic Vibe Tele, Fender Candy Apple Red Tele**
Middle centre (l-r) **Fender USA '57 reissue Strat, red and black chequered Fender Strat, Partscaster**
Middle right (l-r) **'64 Fender Jaguar, '77 Mocha Brown Fender Strat**
Bottom left (l-r) **Fender Modern Player Telecaster, Squier Pro Tone Thinline Tele, Daphne Blue Squier Tele, Squier Pro Tone Fat Tele**
Bottom right (l-r) **Yamaha Pacifica, Yamaha AEX 502 with P-90s**

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Above **Ibanez Starfield, white Squier Anniversary Strat**
Top right **Trio of Seymour Duncan pickups on Squier Strat**
Above right (l-r) **Les Paul Special, Les Paul Classic, Gibson ES-335**

about adding a Vibrola for a bit more of a George vibe, and a '97 Epiphone Casino built at the Fujigen factory in Japan. I'm not a badge snob, I really don't mind where a guitar was built as long as it sounds and plays as it should. My Casino is superb, and it's ideal for playing many of the songs from *Revolver*, *Abbey Road* and other albums besides. I saw this one in a shop in Devon, my wife just loved the sunburst, and convinced me to buy it.

"I had a hankering for a rosewood Tele, as per George playing on the roof of the Apple building in '69, and saw this Japanese reissue in a shop whilst on holiday in London. I was unsure, until Carole said I must buy it because it looked so unusual, which it did of course compared to some of the others in bright solid colours.

"The Hofner bass is also a reissue and another holiday purchase, again in London, this time from Peter Cooks, whilst my Rickenbacker 4003 not only has McCartney influences for me, it also harks back to seeing Yes and the massive Rickenbacker bass sound that Chris Squire had back in the early 1970s."

"I'm not a badge snob, I don't mind where a guitar was built as long as it plays as it should"

Bill also has a fine collection of Telecasters in a variety of finishes and hardware permutations, which he's keen to show us.

"I have around seven more Telecasters, USA-built Fenders, Japanese reissues and the Squier Pro Tone Series, the latter of which between '95 and '97 apparently outsold USA-built Teles," he says.

"Strats also work for me, not just because of George's Rocky though, but what can I say that hasn't already been said about a Strat? I have four at the moment, including a USA '57 reissue I bought from a guy I worked with back in '93. It really was an under-the-bed guitar, as he only played classical nylon-strung guitar.

"I reckon the Strat I have with a red and black chequered finish must have belonged to a player in a ska band. It also has a matching strap.

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"It was up for £14 in a local market. I wandered about looking at the meats and cheeses while I thought about it, went back, and my wife had knocked him down to £12.

"When I bought a Mocha Brown '77 Strat, the scratchplate was loaded with three Seymour Duncan humbuckers from the 70s, complete with coil tap facilities, which I installed in my white Squier Anniversary Strat.

"I love my Fender Jaguar, that dates from '64. It's a particularly clean one, and belonged to a London session player called Tom Bowker. It's such an ideal all-round guitar for rhythm and lead work.

"Just harking back to George here, I wanted a 12-string Rickenbacker, but you either get on with the necks or you don't, which shows what a great job he did. I tried many brands and eventually, by chance, settled on an Ibanez Starfield with a palm-friendly neck. There's plenty of jangle going on there with the single-coil pickups."

"My black Gretsch Duo Jet is another I call one of my 'George' guitars. I use it for slide work"

Bill had never been a fan of Gibsons with humbuckers – until he went on another holiday with his wife, that is. "For a long time, the only Gibson I owned was the SG," he admits. "I couldn't get on with the darker sound of Les Paul humbuckers. We were on holiday in Somerset during Christmas week, and of course ended up in a guitar shop, where Carole kept on about this Les Paul Classic. She knew about my feelings for the humbuckers, but insisted I try it because it looked so cool. What I was unaware of was the fact this model has the baked maple fingerboard, which looks like pau ferro or light rosewood. Not only is it fast, it certainly contributes to a brighter sound, too.

"I'm loving this guitar. At the time, I felt it was far too expensive and left the shop with my tail between my legs. I decided to go back for it a few days later, but they said it had been sold to some guy who came in the same day as me. Anyway, I'll be buggered if it wasn't under the tree all wrapped >

Top left **'76 Gretsch Corvette headstock**
Above left **Wilkinson GTB bridge fitted to Gretsch Corvette**
Above right (l-r) **Black Gretsch Duo Jet, '76 Gretsch Corvette**

Top left (l-r) **Mid-60s Hofner Verythin, early-70s Audition semi**
Top right **Near-mint 'board on Hofner Verythin**
Above left **Switching on Hofner Verythin**
Above right (l-r) **PRS CE24, Duesenberg Starplayer TV, First Act Garage Master**

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up on Christmas morning. Carole bought it behind my back.

"My black Gretsch Duo Jet is another I call one of my 'George' guitars. I use this for a little slide work here and there. George Harrison was such a good slide player. I've read that his experience with the sitar helped inform his slide playing. My Gretsch Corvette from '76 is quite rare these days. The machineheads had been replaced with a set of Grover tuners, and a pair of TV Jones TV-HT pickups were installed. I've also swapped the bridge for a Wilkinson GTB version with the adjustable B and G saddle. It's now a great-sounding guitar that plays really well too."

"My mid-60s Hofner Verythin is the cleanest I've ever seen. The fingerboard looks untouched"

With his heart firmly stuck in the 1960s, Bill next shows us a classic instrument that's in near-mint condition. "My mid-60s Hofner Verythin is the cleanest example I've ever seen," he reports happily. "It had been gathering dust on top of someone's wardrobe in a shabby case for years, and was almost unplayable strung with acoustic strings with a 64-gauge low E. I spent ages cleaning it, and was amazed as I watched it unfold and blossom – the fingerboard looks untouched.

"My First Act Garage Master model was part of a promotional giveaway in the USA when you bought a Volkswagen car. Mine doesn't have the car logo, but it's a really nice guitar. How cool would it have been to buy a VW Beetle and get a guitar as well?

"My Duesenberg semi-hollow Starplayer TV is one of the latest additions to my collection. It can cover nearly all styles, from country to metal, and the company's own Deluxe Tremola design is really smooth and accurate.

"I had a hankering for one of these for ages. We were out shopping once again and Carole said I must buy it just for the gold sparkle scratchplate.

Bill concludes with a quote from another of his 1960s heroes: "As John Lennon once said: 'as usual, there is a great woman behind every idiot'."

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All about... Preamp Valves

The thermionic valve was one of the most significant inventions of the 20th century and the vast majority of guitarists agree that valve amps are superior to their solid-state rivals. **HUW PRICE** charts their history...

Although the silicon chip probably reigns supreme, few other recent technological innovations can be said to have changed our lives more profoundly than the thermionic valve. Without them, we would have been without home audio systems, computers, recorded music, long-distance telephones, radar, television, cinema and radio for most of the 20th century. Space exploration would have started a lot later and, most concerning of all, rock 'n' roll would never have existed.

Technology marched on and by the mid 1960s transistors had taken over many of the functions performed previously by valves. Lower production and running costs, combined with improved reliability, made this shift both sensible and inevitable in many applications, but in high-end audio the valve lived on.

Although some claim that solid-state electronics can match valve performance, and even improve upon it, many hi-fi enthusiasts, recording engineers and musicians remain steadfast in their belief that valves simply sound better. Rightly or wrongly, the vast majority of electric guitarists prefer valves.

Although there are countless types of valves, or tubes as they're known overseas, they mostly serve two functions in guitar amps. Rectifier valves are used in power supplies to help with the process of turning an alternating current into a direct current. Preamp valves and power amp valves both increase amplitude – in other words they turn low-level audio signals into higher-level audio signals. This month, we'll be focusing on triode and pentode preamp valves.

How triodes work

Although you can get diode, triode, tetrode and pentode valves, only triode and pentode preamp valves are found in the signal path of guitar amplifiers. The triode is by far the most common variant, and almost every preamp valve contains two triodes.

Each triode will have three components – an anode (aka plate), a cathode and a control grid. The cathode is wired to ground, usually via a bias resistor and/or a bypass capacitor, so it's negatively charged. The anode is connected to a high-voltage DC power supply via a plate resistor.

The valve also contains a heater (aka filament), and it receives a lower voltage supply that is typically 6.3 volts AC or, very occasionally, 12.6 volts DC. The heater gets hot, glows orange and heats up the cathode. When heated, the cathode begins to emit negatively charged electrons, which flow towards the positively charged anode. This is called 'thermionic emission', which is why valves are sometimes referred to as 'thermionic valves'. The electrons are able to flow because there's a vacuum inside the valve's glass tube – hence the term 'vacuum tube'. Charge flowing between the cathode and plate completes the circuit, so a direct current flows.

Put the 6SL7 and 6SC7 in the right circuit and you get the dirtiest and fattest Billy Gibbons grind

The clever bit is the control grid. A guitar pickup produces a tiny alternating current output. Alternating currents move between positive and negative phases, so when that guitar signal is applied to the grid it causes the grid's charge to vary between positive and negative.

The grid can now attract and repel the electrons. When the guitar signal is in a positive phase, the grid becomes positive, which attracts electrons and ensures that more of them reach the anode. This increases the plate current.

Conversely, a negative phase in the guitar signal will repel the electrons, causing current to drop because fewer electrons reach the anode. The direct current that flows when there is no guitar signal on the grid becomes an alternating current when guitar signal is present.

Remember the anode resistor I mentioned? The alternating current causes the voltage across the resistor to vary, and that voltage variation far exceeds that of the guitar signal voltage. The upshot of all this is that the frequency and wavelength of the alternating voltage appearing at the anode will be identical to the guitar signal, but amplitude will be greatly increased. Therefore, amplification has been achieved.

How pentodes work

Triodes exhibit a problem known as the Miller Effect, whereby capacitance between the plate and the control grid leads to oscillation when gain is pushed beyond a certain level. Adding a second grid, between the control grid and the anode, with a positive voltage that's slightly lower than the anode's, solves the oscillation problem because it acts as an electrostatic shield. It's known as a 'screen grid'.

This type of valve is called a tetrode, but it also has issues because electrons striking the plate at high velocity can cause more electrons to be emitted from the plate itself. This is known as secondary emission.

These electrons released from the plate are attracted to the positively charged screen grid, which results in a loss of plate current. So in this instance the 'screen grid' functions as an unwanted second anode and amplification is lowered.

So, engineers added a third grid located between the screen grid and the anode, known as the 'suppressor grid'. It's connected to the cathode – internally or externally – and held at a negative voltage. It repels electrons released from the anode through secondary emission, so they can be recollected by the anode rather than the screen grid.

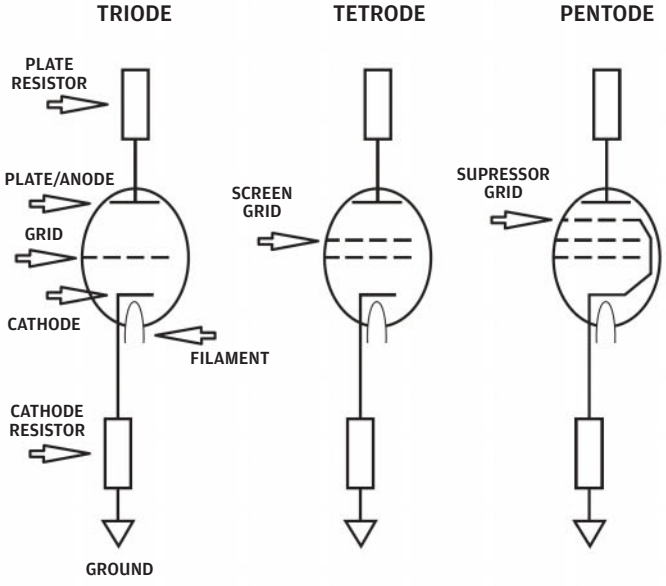
With an anode, cathode, control grid, screen grid and a suppressor grid, a pentode has five component parts – hence the name. Although they can be noisier, pentodes are more efficient than triodes and are capable of even higher gain.

Octal triodes

Up until the mid 1950s, most guitar amps had octal preamp triodes. By far the most common are the 6SC7, 6SN7 and the 6SL7 found in pre-war Gibson amps, early Fender tweeds and Ampegs.

At first sight, they can be mistaken for a small power valve because they are much the same size as 6V6s and plug into large eight-pin sockets – hence the name. With a gain factor of around 70, the 6SL7 and 6SC7 are pretty good performers.

Known for their full midrange tones and sweet treble response, they sound superb for jazz guitar and they even have a following in hi-fi circles. However, put them in the right circuit and you get the dirtiest and fattest Billy Gibbons grind without the edginess or fierceness of some later amp designs. Some types are still in production, but new old stock examples are getting >



harder to find and they can all be prone to microphonics.

Miniature triodes

These days, they look like 'normal' valves, but they were called 'miniature' to differentiate the newer nine-pin valves from the earlier octals. Since they're cathode biased, most of the common nine-pins are interchangeable, but they may not sound their best without circuit tweaks. The ECC88 is an exception to this rule because its pin connections are different.

The 12AX7 (aka ECC83 and 7025) is by far the most common preamp valve seen in guitar amps. Its gain factor should be around 100, and this is a great general-purpose preamp valve with a tone we all know and love.

When Fender first started using nine-pin valves, a 12AY7 (aka 12AY7) was invariably used for V1 and sometimes V2. With a gain of 44, the 12AY7 lasted in many tweeds right up until the brownface era. If your amp is too quick to distort or you're looking for a more open tone with lower noise, try putting a 12AY7 in the front end of your amp.

The 5751 (aka 12AT7) and ECC81 (aka 6201) provide a nice halfway point with gains of 70 and 60 respectively. The 5751 is a great-sounding valve that's a straight swap for a 12AX7. The ECC81 has a cleaner, brighter tone, which limits its guitarist appeal somewhat. The ECC81 is more often used as a phase inverter or a reverb driver in guitar amps than as a preamp valve. With a gain of only 20, the 12AU7 (aka ECC82 & 6189) is seldom seen in guitar preamps. However, it makes a decent phase inverter and works well for effects loop buffering.

Pentodes

Most agree that the gain, clarity and brightness of pentodes are desirable characteristics for guitar amps, but relatively few designs have utilised pentodes in the preamp. You will see the EF86 in early Vox AC30s, AC15s and AC10s, as well as Vox-inspired contemporary amps from Matchless, Top Hat, Dr. Z and 65.

Gibson amps of the 1950s often had a pentode called the 5879 in the front end. Although under appreciated, especially on this side of the pond, amps such as the GA40 sound incredible – and the 5879's fat, creamy and muscular tone is a big part of that magic. The recently released Victoria Electro King is a fantastic-looking and sounding repro of a late-50s GA40 with improved build quality.

The problem with pentodes is finding non-microphonic examples, and it seems only the boutique boys are prepared to test boxes of the things to select low-noise examples and back them up with a warranty. Most sound ringy from the get-go, and even if they start out quiet, they rarely stay that way for very long.

The same can be said of oddball valves such as the ECF82 used in the original Vox AC10. Containing a triode and a pentode in a single enclosure, they can be a real drag. Also be aware that you can't replace a triode with a pentode because the pin connections differ.

BUYER'S GUIDE

New, new old stock and used valves are readily available. Buying from an established valve retailer such as those below should allow you to get a refund if the valve fails within its warranty period. Some will test for low noise and microphony. Buying from private individuals may be cheaper, but also riskier.

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Chord Clinic

DADGAD tuning is one of the most intriguing and commonplace of the alternate tunings for guitar. **ROD FOGG** gets a little bit modal...

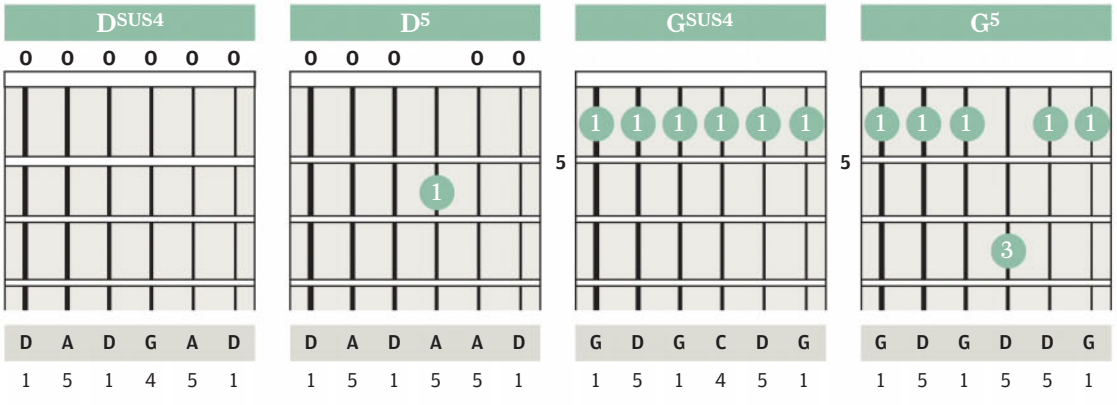
If your guitar is in standard tuning it is not too hard to put it in DADGAD. You could of course use your tuner, but it is good practise for your ears to do it the old-fashioned way.

Start by sounding the low E string at the same time as the D string. Loosen the E string tuner until you get an octave between the two strings. On my steel string, it's just short of one complete turn. Now do the same trick with the high E string so that the sixth, fourth and first strings are all tuned to D – this is often known as "double drop D tuning". Finally, play the B string at the same time as the A string and then lower the B string to make an octave between them – and you're done.

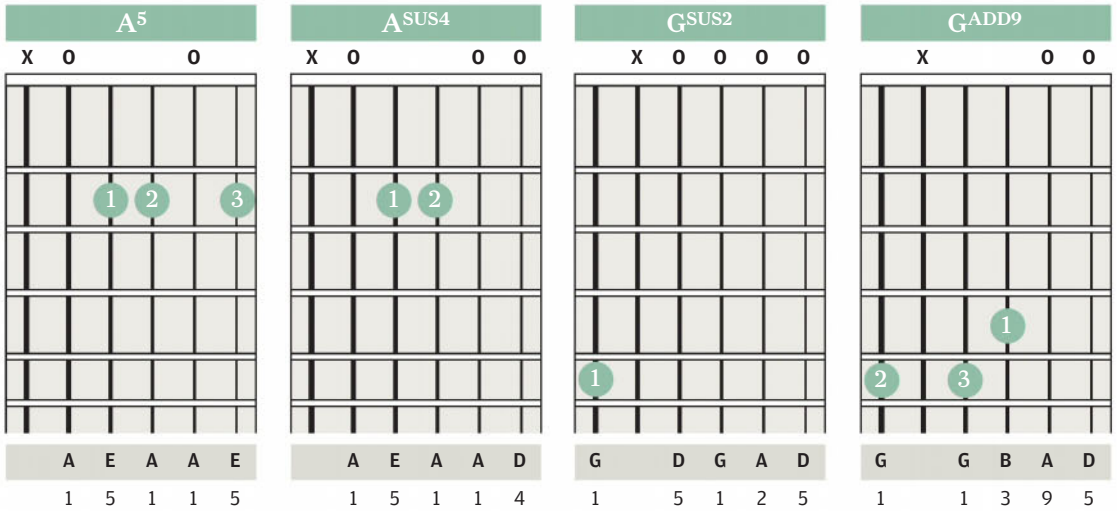
Start by just strumming those open strings, and while you're at it, check out figure 1. The open strings make a chord, Dsus4, which you can turn into a ringing D5 with the addition of just one finger. If you are okay with barre chords, also try the Gsus4 and G5 shapes up at the fifth fret. These barre chords can be played at any fret, so experiment for a while and see what you can come up with – notice the droning quality of open fifths and octaves in the bass and the same note on two different strings in the 5 chord.

DADGAD is called a modal tuning because unlike open G or open D it does not produce a regular 'root-third-fifth' type of chord. In this respect, standard tuning is also technically a modal tuning. DADGAD is perhaps not as flexible as standard tuning (it's not great for blues-rock for example), but it does have a lot of character and is popular with Celtic, world and folk musicians, perhaps because the fifths and octaves in the bass suggest the drones of the pipes and >

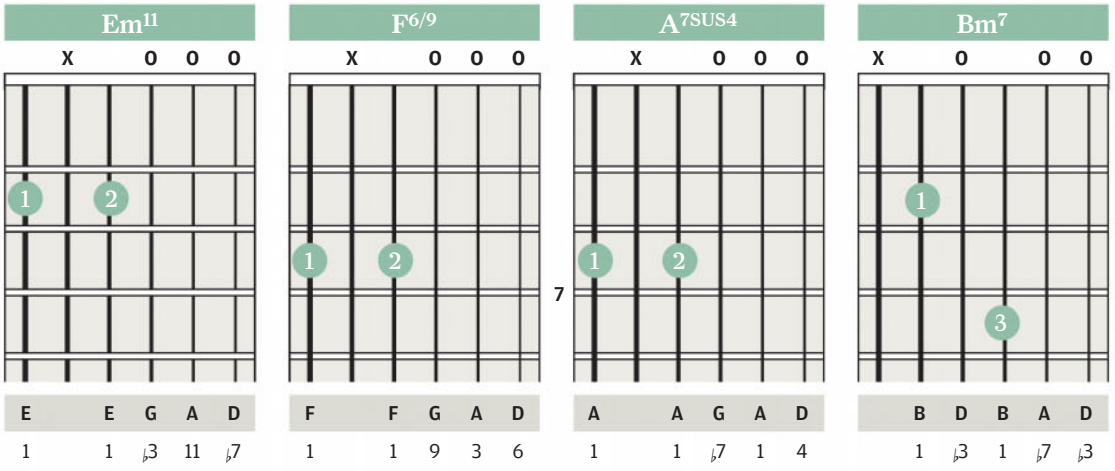
The D-Gs (Fig 1)



Lost in music (Fig 2)



Slide away (Fig 3)



other traditional instruments, while the close spacing of the upper strings encourages a 'let ring' approach to melody.

Staying with V chords and suspensions, there is something hypnotic about simply alternating the first two shapes in figure 2. Feel free to mix in any of the chords from figure 1, but also check out the simple one-finger Gsus2 chord. Maybe it's a little bare sounding; notice how much warmer it sounds with the addition of the major third in the Gadd9 shape.

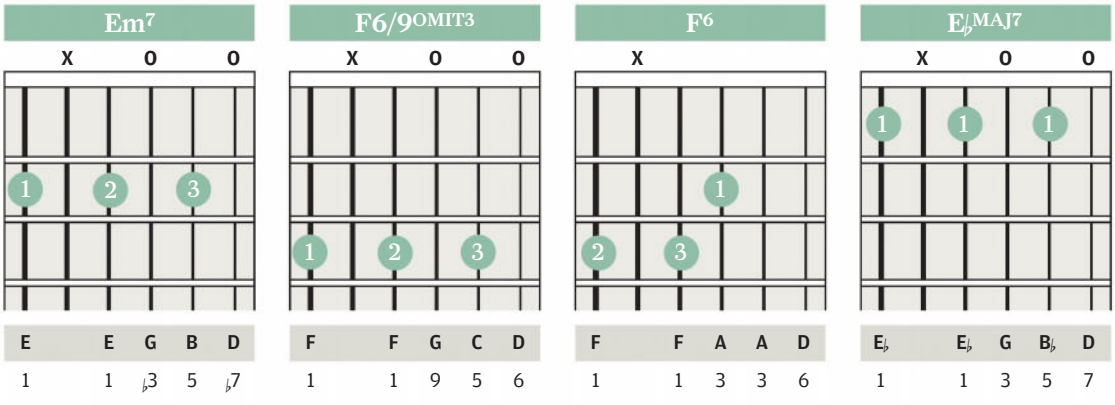
With so many octaves available, it's hard to resist the temptation to simply grab some and slide them around. Em11, F6/9 and A7sus4 are available easily in figure 3, and there is plenty of scope here for experimentation without really worrying too much about the name of the chord you are producing. The Bm7 introduces another shape that can be moved freely around the neck, although in other positions it might be better to mute the fourth string with the underside of your first finger. The first two shapes in figure 4 work well in alternation, and you can take the opportunity to occasionally resolve down to the D5 chord from figure 1. The shape we used for Gadd9 in figure 2 can be moved down a couple of frets to produce an interesting F6 chord, consisting only of the notes F, A and D.

Try moving back and forth between this chord with the final shape in figure 3, a resonant and dreamy E♭maj7. I came across this chord when I sat down to write this column – one of the joys of DADGAD is the discovery of new shapes and sounds that are not available in standard tuning.

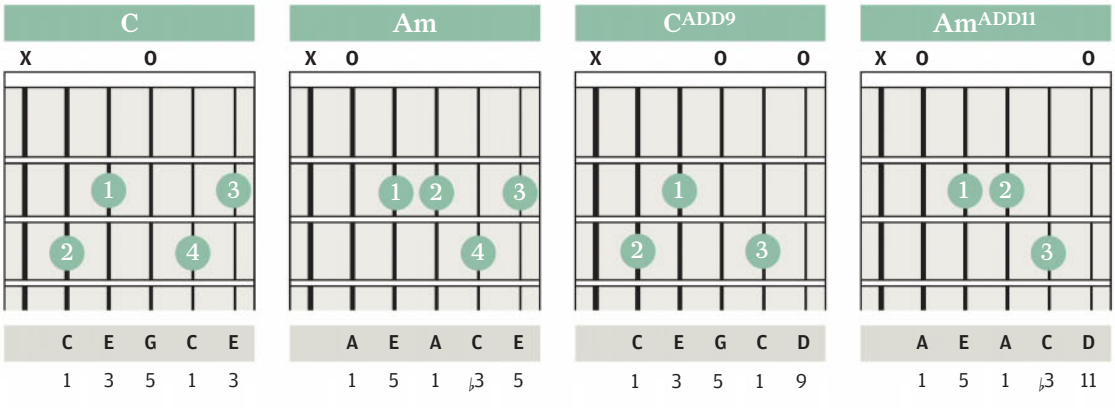
If you find all the drones and pedal notes are becoming wearisome, you may be pleased to discover that it is also possible to play conventional chords in DADGAD tuning. Figure 5 gets you started with C major and A minor, both of which produce exactly the same voicing as the good old cowboy chords that you play in standard tuning. Both are, however, something of a struggle. It is so much easier to play the add9 and add11 versions of these two chords that it's hard to imagine why you wouldn't want to.

It might be interesting to end with a comparison between DADGAD and standard tuning. You may well know that there are many songs around today that use a particular four-chord sequence. In the key of C, it would be C, G, Am F. Try playing those chords in the conventional way (ideally on another guitar so you don't have to re-tune) and then try them in DADGAD using the last two shapes from figure 5, one of the F chords from figures 3 or 4 and one of the G chords from figure 2. It will sound... different. That is just one exciting aspect of DADGAD – making conventional chord sequences sound new and original thanks to its distinctive set of intervals. More next month...

Sixes and sevens (Fig 4)



Tricky voicings (Fig 5)



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Your letters. This month: a happy Bailey Guitars customer, a Line 6 lover and two fans of Huw Price...

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Telling it like it is

I've just been enjoying Huw's article detailing his construction of an attenuator and, as a hobbyist builder, I felt compelled to contact you folks. I love the no-nonsense, no-snobbery, unbiased style of your writing.

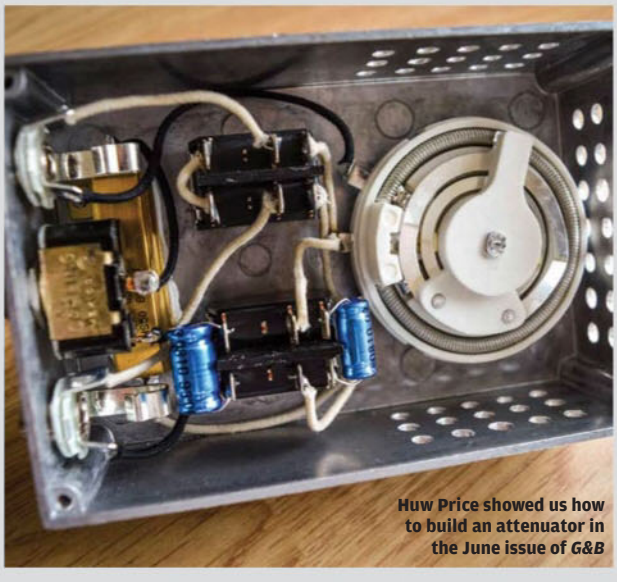
I recently stopped purchasing another rival guitar publication. This was for a variety of reasons. The death knell was the suggestion by one of the writers that guitarists who aren't drawn to relics don't "get it".

Don't get me wrong, I understand that relics have their place in the world. I just don't buy a magazine to have some chap imply what I should like, and that if I don't like it therefore I am naïve or something.

Ultimately, what I like about your writing is that it is informative and educational, whilst not being condescending or elitist. Thanks.

Mitch, via email

***G&B* Thanks for the kind words Mitch, we're a broad church here at G&B and there's room for all tastes. You describe yourself as a 'hobbyist builder' – we'd love to see some of your projects!**



Huw Price showed us how to build an attenuator in the June issue of *G&B*

WRITTEN A LETTER OF THE MONTH?

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ORANGE AMPLIFICATION

Mark Bailey, of Bailey Guitars

Over the Moonshiner

Having read your article in the May 2016 issue of *Guitar & Bass* about the luthier Mark Bailey, and being in the market for a new acoustic guitar, I decided to contact the above with a view to commissioning a new guitar. Having discussed the options available, I decided on the Moonshiner model with a couple of upgrades. The process of making my guitar took approximately six weeks. I did, however, receive very regular updates from Mark and Carol, usually with photographs and sometimes video clips, to appraise me of the progress of my Moonshiner. Mark asked if I wanted an inscription written inside, which although cannot be seen on the finished guitar, makes it very personal to me.

I now have my guitar and should say that it does indeed exceed my expectations. It plays beautifully and the finish is second to none, the tone is fantastic and it compares favourably with any top-brand guitar that I have played. To be honest, ordering a guitar on the strength of your article and reviews on the internet was a bit of a leap of faith for me. It is, however, one that I would recommend. The customer service Mark and Carol afford is in my view second to none, and if in the future I am in the market for another guitar I know who I'll be asking to make it for me.

Terry McCarthy, Coventry

Line 6 of the best

It was good to see an article on the Line 6 Helix [*G&B*, August 2016]. We early adopters have been waiting to see a sensible review for some time. Yes, it's a great switching system and FX unit, but it is also an amazing digital interface, a fab amp modeller, and now, to me, the most essential bit of kit I own. It is half the price of an Axe FX II with a floor controller, and with a greater functionality and a similar level of sound quality (though with fewer models thus far). I think the interface is better though. I've owned all sorts of great amps and wonderful bits of kit. The Helix is a game changer.

Jim Barnes, via email

Tangled up in glue

Hi Huw, I have been following your DIY Workshop articles on the Gretsch renovation with interest. Back in the early 1980s, cascamite was the glue of choice in the joinery world. If we needed to speed up the hardening process, we would mix a couple of drops of formic acid in or paint one side of the wood to be glued with it. It saves a lot of waiting time. I look forward to reading the next instalment.

Phil, via email

***Huw says:* Hi Phil. Thanks for your letter, and I'm glad you're enjoying the restoration articles. The project is seriously stretching my woodworking skills but it's a lot of fun. The cascamite worked really well, but I'm planning to use hide glue for the fingerboard and neck joints so any future restorer might be able to dismantle the guitar easily. Next instalment coming soon, I hope.**

HAVE YOUR SAY! Write to us via snail mail, *Guitar & Bass, Anthem Publishing, Suite 6 Piccadilly House, London Road, Bath BA1 6PL* or email **guitarandbass@anthem-publishing.com.** Alternatively, get in touch via social media on Facebook or Twitter.

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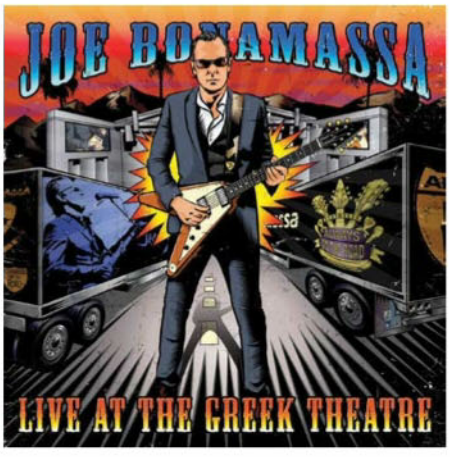
New music

We round up and rate a selection of this month's guitar-driven album releases and reissues



Joe Bonamassa

LIVE AT THE GREEK THEATRE

Joe rounded off a 14-date 2015 US tour with a show at LA's Greek Theatre, and it's the subject of this release in double-CD, triple-vinyl and double-DVD formats. The 22-song set features classics from the repertoires of the three Kings of the blues – Freddie, Albert and Joe's friend and mentor, BB – and is recreated by an 11-piece band with guitarist Kirk Fletcher, keys from Reese Wynans, a horn section and three female vocalists. Naturally, this is a treat for the gear spotters, with authentic Flying Vs, 355s and more going through a vintage Fender backline (and not a single '59 Les Paul in sight). Channelling three vocalists and guitarists whose styles are so fundamentally different is no mean feat, and Bonamassa manages it, filtering the flair of Freddie, the evil streak of Albert and the dynamics of BB into his own slick style. **CM**

9/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *The three Kings; big-band blues*

Oasis

BE HERE NOW – CHASING THE SUN EDITION

Is it sacrilege to say in the pages of *G&B* that there's too much guitar on *Be Here Now*? Well, perhaps, but even Noel Gallagher wouldn't argue with that statement. It's frustrating, too, as in amidst the chemical bombast and over-long codas, there are some cracking tunes here. The remastered original album sounds pristine and B-sides *Stay Young*, *The Fame* and *Flashbax* are sturdy enough, but it's the unreleased tracks and Noel-sung Mustique demos that are the most interesting things here. For the most part, they're fully formed and pretty close to the finished studio versions. There's more emotional heft to the alternative takes of *Don't Go Away*, and *Stand By Me* remains a stand-out. A fully unplugged version of *Be Here Now*? Now there's a tantalising proposition... **SH**

8/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *The Beatles, Slade*

Pixies

HEAD CARRIER

The intangible alchemy that made Pixies one of the most cherished alternative bands of all time lay in the fragile balance between gloriously melodic pop and sonic anarchy. On their second album since reuniting, the pendulum frequently swings too close to the former. Kim Deal replacement Paz Lenchantin provides vocals on *All I Think About Now*, a tribute to Deal and, throughout their seventh album, Pixies display a light touch that often lacks edge. The title track and the brilliantly insane *Um Chagga Lagga* redress the balance, with Joey Santiago at his uniquely unhinged creative best. *Bel Esprit* is up there with some of their finest moments; but, with mid-album low point *Talent* a case in point, it often feels as if the essential elements of a Pixies song are in place, but the sum of those parts falls short of their brilliant best. **GW**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Junior*

Nick Waterhouse

NEVER TWICE

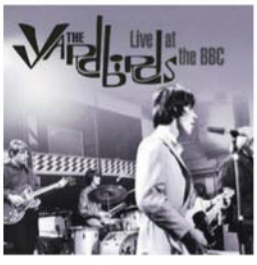
Citing Mose Allison, John Lee Hooker and Van Morrison as influences, the R&B, soul and jazz roots of Californian Nick Waterhouse ooze out of every pore. The singer-guitarist plays second fiddle to keyboards and piano on the finger-snapping *It's Time* and *I Had Some*, there's a Ray Charles swing to *Straight Love* and a slinky jazzy feel to the superb *Stanyan Street*. It makes for a fine collection of vintage, easy-going tunes. **SH**

8/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Van Morrison, Ray Charles*

The Yardbirds

LIVE AT THE BBC



This remastered two-CD set covers sessions from the BBC archives between '65 and '68, when The Yardbirds had onboard the mercurial talents of Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. Interspersed with plummy interviews from the era, the band's vitality is captured, and even though they considered sessions of this kind only as fun, one-off snapshots, it makes for a document of a confident, experimental, underrated band. **CM**

8/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Small Faces, Cream*

Devin Townsend Project

TRANSCENDENCE

The 10th DTP release sees some 'adjustments' to the way Devin typically constructs an album. The autocratic control from performance to production has been relinquished somewhat, with input afforded to band members and engineers. There's a darker, rawer element to the sound, and opening up the recording and engineering process has produced a solid metal album and a much-needed revitalisation of DTP's sound. **DC**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Gojira, Lamb of God*

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JONATAN RAMM

"My Spinal Tap moment..."

The guitarist from bluesy Swedish hard-rockers Graveyard on six-strings, influences and unreliable vehicles...

1 I couldn't live without...
"My 1958 reissue Les Paul. It has a little fatter neck on it, so it fits my hand very good. And I have an old Gibson SG Special with P-90s. The electronics are 60s, but the guitar was made in the early 1970s."

2 In another life I would be...
"This is what I've been dreaming of and now we're doing it, so I'm very happy. But I used to be a painter, painting houses."

3 The moment that started it all...
"We have shit radio in Sweden, they hardly play any good music on it, but one night I was on my way home in the car and they played *The Wizard* by Black Sabbath. That made me try to get better, and I knew that was what I wanted to do."

4 The one that got away...
"I've been selling a bunch of stuff and there are some old guitars I kind of wish I had, nice old Guild guitars and stuff. But sometimes you have no choice and you've gotta sell 'em!"

5 My Spinal Tap moment...
"The confusion is always there, when you don't find the stage. That happens all the time. One of the bigger mistakes was to buy a really shitty van. We went to the Netherlands to do a show and, of course, the engine broke down. We were stuck in a town and everything was closed because it was a Sunday. We found this guy who had this little Volvo that we got to buy really cheap. It said 'I Love Jesus' on the back. Then, in the middle of a highway in Germany, that car broke down. We had to climb these bridges, and you're not allowed to, you know? Then the cops came..."

6 The best advice I've ever been given...
"I like Bill Hicks, and the way he would talk about Jimi Hendrix... Play with your heart."

7 The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar...
"I usually just play around the blues scale and have fun."

8 The most important thing on my rider...
"Water is the most important, but you want a couple of beers as well."

9 My guiltiest musical pleasure...
"I listen to a lot of different music. Everything from old jazz and blues to modern death metal."

10 If I could learn to play one thing...
"I'm a big Peter Green and Fleetwood Mac fan, there are songs of his I would like to play, but there's never time..."

Graveyard's new album *Innocence & Decadence* is out on 25 September via Nuclear Blast

Photo by Jordan Curtis Hughes

Stand Out in the Crowd

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